

BUCKSKIN SAM'S ROBBER-RANGERS RUN-IN!

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The Ranch King Dead-Shot; or, TEXAS JACK'S PROXY.

BY "BUFFALO BILL."



GLANCING UP BUCKSKIN SAM SAW HALF A DOZEN HORSEMEN ON A ROCKY SHELF NOT TWENTY FEET OVER HIS HEAD.

The Ranch King Dead-Shot;
OR,
TEXAS JACK'S PROXY.
A STORY OF
Buckskin Sam's Robber-Rangers Run-In.

BY "BUFFALO BILL,"
(COL. WM. F. CODY.)

CHAPTER I.

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

"WELL, at last the long red trail I have followed is ended, peace reigns along the Rio Grande, and I shall ask Colonel Elwood for the month's leave I have earned and go down and visit my old pard, Buckskin Sam of—"

The angry crack of a rifle rung out from a group of rocks and silenced the voice of the speaker as the bullet cut its way along the side of his head.

The startled spring of his horse threw the rider backward and he fell heavily from his saddle, lying a limp heap upon the ground.

Then from out of his ambush sprung the man who had aimed to kill, and as he ran toward the fallen form he cried exultantly:

"At last we are even, Texas Jack, for I am avenged, and a Mexican loves revenge more than gold."

The one who had been fired upon was seated upon the summit of a ridge overlooking a good expanse of country.

He sat in the saddle with that easy grace that is natural to the Texan horseman, and his appearance was striking and picturesque.

His costume was a pair of buckskin leggings, fringed, embroidered and stuck in the tops of handsome boots, upon the heels of the latter being a pair of Mexican spurs of unique design.

He wore a silk shirt, a belt of arms and a sash about his waist, with a massive gold chain swung about his neck and attached to a heavy gold watch set with diamonds representing a five point star.

His hat was a sombrero of grayish hue, embroidered with silver thread of various designs, while again was the Texas star of diamonds looping up the flap on one side.

The horse was an elegant animal, equipped with silver-mounted saddle and bridle, and while a long lariat hung at the horn a repeating rifle was slung from the cantel.

The animal, startled at the shot and fall of his rider had run off a few paces, turned and walked slowly back to the motionless form.

With a low neigh he had put his nose close down to the face, snorted with anger as he smelt the pale blood, and then pawed the ground with impatience.

Just then the man who had fired from ambush came into view, running along the ridge, rifle in hand, and gloating over his red deed and the prospect of the gain it would bring him, for he recalled the diamond stars his foe wore, the fine watch and chain, a solitaire ring, the elegant trappings and the splendid horse, all of which must go to him upon the lawless argument in his mind that "to the victor belonged the spoils."

But, just then, the flashing eyes of the horse fell upon him.

Instinctively he knew that he was the one who had fired upon his master, and the horse, too, sought revenge.

With a wild neigh of anger he laid back his ears, stretched his head far out, his white teeth revealed by the upturned lips as he held them ready to seize his foe.

At first the man showed no fear.

He was a stoutly-built, dark-faced fellow with an evil glitter in his eyes and a look of crime stamped upon every feature.

As he realized that the horse was rushing upon him with intent to attack him, he gave a sharp cry to check him.

The horse was not checked by his cry, and then, with a bitter oath, the man raised his rifle and cried:

"I must kill him or he will kill me!"

But, though the butt of the rifle pressed his shoulder, the trigger was not pulled, for, just then, there came a shot from a distance and a bullet cut its way through the sombrero of the man, close to his temple.

With a yell of terror he turned, just as the

horse was within twenty feet of him, and leaped to the shelter of a rock near, darting from this to another, and so on down the ridge to safety from a foe more dangerous than his equine enemy would have proven.

But he had seen the one who had fired the shot at long range, and with a little Spanish oath cried:

"It is Buckskin Sam!"

"I must fly for my life now, and in the moment of my triumph."

CHAPTER II.

BUCKSKIN SAM.

The horseman rode along the ridge at full speed, his horse leaping obstructions, and halting only when reined up at the spot where the man had fled from a few moments before.

The horse of the one who had been shot from his saddle greeted his equine pard with a neigh of friendly recognition and then trotted over to where his rider had fallen.

"He escaped me after all, and I have not time to follow his trail."

"I distinctly saw him fire from ambush at some one, and I took the chances of a long shot at him—ha! as I live it is Texas Jack!"

The horseman now leaped from his saddle, and dropped on his knees by the side of the prostrate form.

"My poor pard, Jack!"

"Have they called in your chips at last?"

"It was an assassin's hand that did it, and I will avenge you, Jack—ha! he is not dead!"

"Let me see that wound."

He thrust his finger into the wound over the temple, felt there an instant and said:

"It was a close call, but the skull is not fractured, I think, and the wound may not be fatal."

"It is five long miles from here to Fort Blanco, but I must get him there with all haste—yes, I must carry him."

He first tried to revive him, but only for a moment, as he seemed in a hurry to go on his way, and failing in his effort he raised the form in his arms, placed it upon a rock, mounted his horse and bending over drew the wounded man up in front of him.

Calling to the horse of the wounded man to follow he rode on along the ridge at a slow canter, holding the form as comfortably as he could, and with a strength a person would not have suspected that one of his slender, almost boyish form possessed.

He was a man below the average height, slender, graceful, but wiry and athletic; in fact, he was as tough as a pine knot, and could stand any amount of tax upon his strength, powers of endurance and nerves.

He was dressed as a Texan Ranger, a black plume drooping from his slouch hat, and about him was an air in spite of his small physique, that was commanding and striking.

His features were clean-cut, bold, fearless and determined, and his eyes as sharp as an eagle's.

His hair was jet black and worn long, hanging far below his broad shoulders.

The horse he rode was a splendid animal, long-bodied, clean-limbed and gaunt as a greyhound, while he was equipped with the broad-horned saddle, and horse-hair bridle of the Texan Rangers.

Once down the steep trail of the ridge, the horseman set his horse into a sweeping gallop with the remark:

"It's double duty, old pard, but Texas Jack's life depends upon you now, so go with all your speed."

The animal seemed to feel just what he had to do, and though already tired by a long ride, he went along at a pace that would soon bring him to the fort, the flag of which could soon be seen far ahead.

Behind came Texas Jack's faithful horse, following like a dog, and thus, after a ride of half an hour, they dashed into the stockade entrance of the fort and a cheer greeted the man who thus bore his friend's form in his arms.

As though acquainted with the fort the horseman kept up his rapid pace to the hospital and drawing rein before the quarters of the surgeon-in-chief called out:

"Doctor Powell, I have brought you Texas Jack, badly wounded, but, thank God, not dead."

"I am bearing dispatches, sir, so must hurry away to headquarters."

Two soldiers took the limp form of Texas Jack from the arms that had carried it so far and well, and at the command of Surgeon Powell followed him into the hospital, while the horseman, with a call to a man to look after the scout's horse, wheeled and dashed rapidly away to the headquarters of the commandant.

News had already been taken to Colonel Elwood that Texas Jack, chief of scouts at Fort Blanco, had been brought in mortally wounded, and in his anxiety to know the truth he walked out upon the piazza as the horseman rode up, leaped from his saddle and advanced toward him.

"Well, Buckskin Sam, I am glad to see you; but I learn that you have bad news," cried Colonel Elwood, a handsome man of fifty, with martial bearing and the courtly manners of the perfect gentleman.

"I have dispatches for you, Colonel Elwood, from General Merritt, and upon my way, sir, I came upon Texas Jack, who had been just shot by a Mexican from ambush, sir."

"Shot from ambush, and by a Mexican?" quickly asked the colonel.

"Yes, sir, but I hope the wound is not fatal, though poor Jack is unconscious."

"I brought him here, sir, from five miles back, and Doctor Powell has him in charge."

"Yes, I heard of your gallant act, Buckskin Sam," but, come in, while I look over these dispatches."

CHAPTER III.

LOVES AND HATES IN BORDER LIFE.

FORT BLANCO was a favorite post with officers and their families, and the soldiers.

It was delightfully located, and there was a large enough force there to make dwelling there a pleasure in a social way, and excitement enough in the way of Indians on the war-path, road-agents on the trails, and Mexican raiders dashing across the Rio Grande, to keep the post busy, and lend excitement to life there.

Just prior to the scene that opens this story, there had been considerable excitement caused through the acts of certain Mexican outlaws, and Texas Jack had been successful in bringing to punishment, through his secret work as a ferret scout, a number of the guilty ones.

Situated some distance from the Rio Grande, on the American side, was Fort Blanco, while upon the Mexican shore, equally distant from the river, were stationed a crack command of Mexican Lancers, under the leadership of a young colonel, Miguel Sandos, a man of high character, distinguished services, and possessed of great riches, his headquarters being in his own beautiful hacienda of Buena Vista.

It having been the good fortune of Colonel Sandos to save Colonel Elwood, and his beautiful daughter from capture by Indians, on one occasion, when he risked his life to do so, from that day he had become a dangerous rival of the young officers of Fort Blanco for the hand of Estelle Elwood, who was known as the Queen of Blanco; but the noble nature of the young Mexican officer won the respect and admiration of even those who feared that he was going to win their Queen.

Another Mexican of rank and wealth, yet a man mysterious to all who knew him, had won favor in the eyes of all at Fort Blanco by services also rendered the colonel and Estelle, and when afterward he, too, cast loving eyes upon Estelle Elwood, there were those who predicted that there would be a most dangerous and deadly rivalry spring up between the two, Colonel Miguel Sandos and Don Marlo Fuentes, the "Ranchero King" as he was called, for he owned a large estate up in the mountains known as Hacienda Del Monte, and where had thousands of horses and cattle and an army of herders to care for them.

Don Marlo's forefathers, it was said, had been conspirators, and were put to death, to be avenged by this man of the third generation after, who had been reared on his estate until he was approaching manhood, then gone abroad for several years, and returning had entered the army to strike at those who had been guilty of his kinsmen's death.

He had struck with deadly hand, in the *duello*, the descendants of those whom he deemed the ones to cast shame upon his name and bring ruin upon his forefathers.

Leaving the army he had gone into retirement upon his mountain estate, a mysterious, dashing, handsome man, splendidly educated yet living only in moody remembrance of what he deemed his duty as an avenger.

It had been Texas Jack's luck to save the life of Don Marlo Fuentes, the Ranchero King, and yet the scout had never liked the man or trusted him.

Colonel Sandos he did like, immensely, and it was through his aid that Texas Jack had been able to track down, and deal a serious blow against a band of Mexican outlaws known as the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande.

It was while congratulating himself upon the ending of this red trail that the chief of scouts at Blanco, while seated upon his horse on the ridge, was fired upon from ambush, and his intended murderer was driven off by Buckskin Sam.*

Such was the situation of affairs at Fort Blanco when Buckskin Sam went there as the bearer of important dispatches from General Merritt, and arrived upon the scene just in time to see an assassin fire upon his tried and true comrade, Texas Jack.

CHAPTER IV.

THE AVENGER TAKES THE TRAIL.

THE colonel glanced quickly over the dispatches handed him by Buckskin Sam, whom he had told to be seated near him, and then said:

"It seems that the general has been driving out the bands of outlaws from the lower river, as we have been, and he tells me to look out for them to ally themselves with those I have to deal with, while he gives me the names of several who are outlawed by both the Mexican and our Government, a price set upon their heads by both, and the information that they will doubtless join their commander up here.

"Yes, sir, they at once started for the upper country," said Sam Hall.

"You know this?"

"Yes, sir, I trailed them, and so reported to the general."

"The general says that you know these men well by sight."

"I do."

"And suggests that I keep you here as the ally of Texas Jack to run them down; but, poor fellow, I fear from what you tell me he may die."

"I hope not, sir, with all my heart, but Doctor Powell could doubtless inform you by this time, sir, of his condition."

The colonel took the hint and sent his orderly to ask Doctor Powell as to the exact condition of the chief of scouts.

Then he said:

"I am glad you have come, Buckskin Sam, especially at a time when I am deprived of the very valuable services of Texas Jack, who, if he is not fatally shot, will be laid up for some time, I fear."

"Now, I know your record, Major Hall, as commander of the Rangers, which position you gave up to serve the Government as scout, guide and interpreter, and I know of no man better qualified for the dangerous work to be done on this frontier than are you."

"I thank you, Colonel Elwood, and I will try and do my duty, sir, for I suppose I am to remain here to watch for those fugitive outlaws."

"Yes, by all means, and I am glad that the general has placed no limit upon your time here."

"So am I, sir, for I am most anxious to run down the fellow who fired upon Jack, as he was mounted and I can easily take his trail."

Just then the orderly returned to say that Surgeon Powell reported the chief of scouts not fatally wounded, but that he feared brain fever would follow the shock of the

bullet, as though he had rallied from his state of insensibility, he was delirious.

Both the colonel and Buckskin Sam were delighted to hear a better report from the surgeon than they had hoped for, and the former said:

"Now to the work in hand, Hall."

"Yes, sir."

"Of late Texas Jack has been a very bitter foe of the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande, and I do not doubt but that his enemy in this case was one of them."

"There was one known as Pablo the Peon, who had lived in Texas, and whom Jack allowed to go free after he had made an attempt upon his life, and he may have been the one."

"There was another one who was captured by Texas Jack, along with an American by the name of Buck Parker, said to be an officer of the Outlaw Rangers."

"He made a daring attempt to escape by springing from a cliff into the Rio Grande, got swept into a whirlpool at the ford, and, but for Jack, would have drowned, for he refused to accept his life unless he was promised his freedom."

"Texas Jack set him free, and stated that he could not but admire the plucky fellow, while his companion, Pedro, turned traitor and aided us in corralling the outlaw band."

"Of course, he was allowed to go, and he may have been the man who attempted to kill Texas Jack."

"He may be, sir! but this Buck Parker I have met, and like."

"He seemed to have a cruel destiny, for try as he might to live a square life he was dogged by misfortune, and at last driven into outlawry, and I heard that he had come to this part of the country some time ago and became the leader of the Robber Rangers."

"He is one of the men I am to look after, sir."

"All right, we must capture him; but let me post you regarding one who is a most remarkable character, and a mystery to all of us."

"His name is Don Marlo Fuentes, and he is an ex-officer of the Mexican Army. While, though I can but receive him as a gentleman, Texas Jack was always suspicious of him."

"I knew of him, sir; in fact, we met once, a number of years ago, and I, too, am suspicious that he is not all that he seems. I do not speak of him only as the noted duelist that he is, but that I believe he lives a double life."

"Prove it if you can, Buckskin Sam, and you have my everlasting gratitude; but you are tired, so now go to your quarters and we will talk over matters again."

"I will at once, sir, get a fresh mount and strike the trail of the man who fired on Texas Jack," replied Buckskin Sam, and half an hour after the avenger was on the trail.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAITOR'S FATE.

BUCKSKIN SAM rode away from the fort anxious to reach the scene where Texas Jack had been ambushed, and take the trail before sunset, camping on it all night and thus be ready for an early start the next morning.

He reached the scene and quickly found where the intended assassin had hitched his horse while waiting for his victim.

"He was lying in the mountains here for some time, watching the trail from the fort."

"Yes, he intended to kill Texas Jack and was without doubt one of the Mexicans of whom Colonel Elwood spoke."

"His trail is plain enough, and I will be able to push rapidly on."

Having so decided Buckskin Sam started his horse off at a canter along the ridge, the way the trail led.

He had ridden about an hour and halted, just as the sun was touching the horizon and he had reached the valley.

The scene was a beautiful one, inciting calm repose, and the ranger began to glance about him for a place for his camp.

He saw a clump of timber on a little creek half a mile away.

The trail did not lead to it, but he could readily pick it up in the morning.

So toward the timber he rode and he was

within fifty yards of it when suddenly, over the top of the creek bank burst forth a cloud of smoke followed instantly by the crack of a rifle.

Buckskin Sam's first thought was that he had been fired upon.

Out in the open as he was, with his foe protected by the bank of the stream, he could run no greater risk by dashing forward and coming to close quarters with his enemy than by wheeling and flying out of range, or by remaining there.

He had not heard the whir of the bullet, and yet within easy range, and from beyond the bank, the shot had certainly been fired.

So he drove the spurs into the flanks of his horse, and in an instant was riding at full speed toward the bank, his revolver in hand.

But, as the scout reached the timber his horse shied and he drew rein suddenly as he beheld, lying behind a rock, a human form, clutching his rifle and having fallen in a crouching position just as though he had been killed while he was about to fire his rifle.

A red spot in the back of his neck showed where the bullet had entered and that death had been instantaneous.

In a second Buckskin Sam had dismounted, his horse was hitched to a tree, and seeking the shelter of a rock himself, he called out:

"Ho, who fired that shot?"

From beyond the bank came the response: "I did, for he was lying in ambush to kill you, Texas Jack."

"Ah! I suspected as much; but I am not Texas Jack."

"So I now discover; you are Major Sam Hall, the Ranger."

"Yes, and who are you?"

"One who has a price on his head, Buckskin Sam, that you have sought to earn."

"Well, you have saved my life, pard, and that cancels all feelings now against you that I may have had."

"Then it is peace, not war between us?"

"Certainly."

"I am willing, and yet I now hold the upper hand, as I am well ambushed here."

"I say it is peace between us, pard—see!" and Buckskin Sam stepped out into full view.

Immediately over the bank sprung a tall form with broad shoulders and a military bearing.

He was clad in Mexican garb, a little worn yet very picturesque and wore a silver-embroidered sombrero.

"Buck Parker!" cried Buckskin Sam, as he came toward him with quick, firm tread.

"Yes, Major Hall, Buck Parker the fugitive from the gallows and Texas Vigilantes, and who was driven across the Rio Grande to escape an ignominious death."

"Well, Parker, I owe my life to you, whatever you may be, and when I say that, it means a great deal, for I have few friendships."

"That fellow fired on Texas Jack ten miles back on the range, and wounded him, perhaps fatally, and I carried him to the fort and then came back to follow the trail to the end."

"It ends here, for the man is Pedro, a Mexican, and a traitor to our band, for there is no disguising it, Sam Hall, I am an outlaw!"

"Texas Jack spared me, set me free, but that fellow bought his life and freedom by treachery, and so I took his trail and he has met his fate."

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS OUTLAW.

"THEN you were trailing this man?" asked Buckskin Sam.

"Yes."

"We were released from the fort, for Tex as Jack had captured us some time ago."

"A feeling of sentiment, an admiration for pluck, as he put it, caused Mr. Omohundro to set me free, after the Ranger Robbers had been hit a terrible blow, and so I decided to follow the man who had bought his freedom and kill him."

"I saw him go into camp, after passing this timber, and then his actions betrayed that he was preparing to ambush some one."

"He was patient, so was I."

* Major Sam S. Hall of Texas, known also as "Little Yank," he having gone to the Lone Star State from Massachusetts. Major Hall served with distinction as a Texan Ranger, and became a noted scout and guide, while he was a terror to the outlaws along the Rio Grande. He died a few years ago at Wilmington, Delaware. —THE AUTHOR.

"He waited for hours, and so did I."

"At last I saw you coming, and at a glance took you for Texas Jack, the horse leading me to that belief also, for I recognized the animal."

"Yes, it is Jack's horse, as I got a fresh mount at the fort."

"You fired as the fellow was ready to fire upon me?"

"Just in time, for I was watching him."

"But my horse is down the stream half a mile, where I have a camp—will you accept its hospitality for the night?"

"Yes, thank you, for it is a long trail back to the fort, after having been two days in the saddle."

"We must bury this man, though, and what he has belongs to you, so help yourself."

"Yes, I wish to have proof that he is dead—I shall take his scalp."

"Ah! you do that?"

"Well, yes, under the circumstances I must—see here."

He raised the head of the man and showed that just where his scalp-lock would be taken by an Indian, was a lock of white hair forming a patch in the midst of the inky black.

"All knew of this peculiarity, so this will be proof of his death, as well as having his horse and traps along," said the self-confessed outlaw, and before Buckskin Sam could say a word to prevent, he had swung his knife around in a circle about the head of the dead man and wrenched off a scalp-lock of long black and white hair commingled.

"You are a strange combination, Buck Parker, and I have heard many strange stories told of you."

"Most of which are untrue, Buckskin Sam."

"I have had enough of grief, persecution, and hounding to make me a fiend, and yet I have a conscience that is not yet callous."

"What I am I am, and there seems to be no help for it."

"Wrong, malice and envy, with a desire to possess my inheritance drove me to become an outcast, and I now accept my fate."

"Surely you will not again return to a lawless life?"

"I will return to the refuge I have beyond the Rio Grande, the life I have led of late."

"But the Robber Rangers are wiped out."

"Don't you believe it, Buckskin Sam, for they are more powerful than you think."

"Through Texas Jack and Colonel Elwood's soldiers, they met with stinging defeats, but they are not wiped out by any means."

"But let us not discuss the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande, but more pleasant things, as we camp together to-night and go our separate ways to-morrow."

"Come, it is getting dark, so we will carry the body of Pedro the Traitor to camp and bury it there."

Buckskin Sam regarded the strange man with deeper interest than ever.

He saw a handsome, manly face, tinged with an expression of bitterness and sadness combined.

There was nothing sinister or evil in his really fine face; rather a look that was gentle and noble.

The two men put the body of the Mexican across his horse and led the way to the camp of the fugitive Texan.

It was a pleasant spot, well protected, with the stream at hand and wood and game in plenty.

"I have been watching for Pedro the Traitor since leaving the fort," explained the outlaw when he saw that Buckskin Sam's glance showed him that he had been there for several days.

"Yes, and you did not watch in vain; but say, pard, why not turn over a new leaf and give up your wild, desperate life?"

"Because each leaf I turn over appears to be blacker than the preceding one."

"No, I am destined to be a fugitive, an outcast, and I shall follow now wherever fate leads me," was the sad reply.

The body of the Mexican was buried, a fire was built and the ranger and the outlaw sat down and ate together as though no barrier of crime divided them, after which

they wrapped themselves in their blankets and slept side by side until the dawn.

Then they parted, Buckskin Sam saying:

"Good-by, Parker, and do not let me have some day in the future to see you hanged."

"It may be," was the sad response.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING.

THE outlaw sat upon his horse gazing after Buckskin Sam, as he rode away on his trail back to the fort, and a sigh broke from his lips as he muttered:

"And why is it I am not respected, honored and can win a name like his?"

"Cruel Fate ordained otherwise, and I am a hunted man, an outcast, driven to robbery and outlawry by those who have been my implacable foes, those who should have protected me."

"But the die is cast and I go my way back to the old life again of wrong and revenge."

He sighed as he turned his horse and rode away, and after a moment continued:

"A noble fellow is Buckskin Sam, true as steel to his friends, and untiring and undaunted in following the trail of a foe."

"He has made a name for himself in Texas, and done a world of good, while the lawless element dread him terribly."

"I wonder what he is doing over here near Fort Blanco?"

"Well, I suppose I will soon know, for when he moves it is generally known through his deeds."

"Now to go to the rendezvous and see who is there, and just how hard the Robber Rangers were hit."

He had the horse of the Mexican he had killed in lead, and proceeded on in a given direction, following no particular trail.

It was nearly noon when he reached the Rio Grande, at a point where there had been recently a camp.

He halted there for his noonday rest, though, as he muttered to himself:

"I would be safer on the other side of the river."

"This whirlpool ford is a most dangerous crossing, and many a man has lost his life here, and how near a call I had I can never forget."

"But for Texas Jack's humanity I would have drowned in that whirlpool, and now in its dark depths I would lie forever at rest."

"I hope Omohundro will get well of his wound, but should he not, I have avenged him."

Having halted for an hour in the camp, he mounted and rode down the steep trail to the ford.

The ford was a dangerous one, for a whirlpool swept savagely around on one side, and a bed of treacherous quicksand was upon the other, so that one had to know well the way to guide his horse or death was certain.

Either the whirlpool would sweep him away into the whirling caldron of waters, and sweep him out of sight, or the treacherous quicksands would engulf him.

But, the fugitive rode boldly into the waters, guided by certain points on the other shore, and had soon crossed to safety.

It was late in the afternoon when he again halted upon a ridge that overlooked a vast plain with a mountain range beyond.

"I will wait here until nightfall, for I do not care to be seen by any of Colonel Sandos's Lancers."

"They are as bitterly the foes of the Robber Rangers as are the United States cavalry, though I have heard the Mexicans say that before Colonel Sandos took command the officer in charge along the frontier was paid big money by the outlaw chief to give him full right to push across the river into Texas territory, and kill and pillage at will."

"But the handsome Colonel Sandos, is not that style of a commander."

As it neared twilight, the outlaw rode out of his shelter on the ridge and started at a canter for the mountains beyond the broad plain.

He had reached the foot-hills and was passing into a narrow canyon, when loud, clear and threatening came the command in Spanish:

"Halt! you are on the threshold of death!"

Instantly he responded, speaking in good Spanish:

"When duty calls, death has no fears for me."

"From whence come you?"

"From beyond the Rio Grande."

"Why do you come here?"

"Duty calls."

"Who do you come to see?"

"The guerrilla chief, El Sol."

"You bear a name?"

"El Capitan."

At once came the reply in perfect English:

"Ah, Senor Captain Parker, it is you, is it?"

"Yes, and I recognize your voice."

"As what do you recognize me?" was the quick question.

"As El Sol, Chief of the Robber Rangers."

"It is well that you do not recognize me otherwise, for it would be your death-knell, Parker."

"I have no wish, no curiosity to know you as other than Chief El Sol."

"Therein you are wiser than others were. But I thought you a prisoner to the Americans, or hanged?"

"I was a prisoner, and of the two who crossed with me, one was killed and Pedro taken with me."

"Pedro turned traitor to save his life, and—"

"Ha! where is he?"

"I killed him last night, chief, for when I was set free I took his trail."

"You have proof?"

"I have his scalp, the lock of white and black hair, his horse and outfit."

"Good! but how is it that you were set free?"

"Texas Jack returned a service I had rendered him."

"Pedro laid in ambush to kill Texas Jack, and wounded him, but was pursued by a Ranger, whom he sought to kill when I ended his career."

"But I have news for you, chief."

"Well?"

"Buckskin Sam the Texan Ranger is at Fort Blanco."

"Ah! that bodes us no good; but the Robber Rangers are not dead, though crippled, and you are to still be captain of the band in the field."

"Come with me," and the outlaw rode forward into the canyon, and joined the chief who had challenged him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE ACT OF FRIENDSHIP.

COLONEL MIGUEL SANDOS was known as the handsomest man in the Mexican Army, and that was saying a great deal.

He was a dashing soldier withal, a splendid officer and a courtly gentleman.

Above the height of men of his race, graceful, courtly in bearing and with a big heart and noble nature, it was no wonder that he had won the heart of Estelle Elwood, the beautiful daughter of the American colonel, especially when he held the claim of having saved her father and herself from capture by the cruel Comanches, and through an act of most desperate daring on his part.

There were numberless beautiful women in Mexico who had sought to win the heart of the gallant and rich young colonel, and one with a fair show of success, Juanita Corsala, the sister of one of his captains, until Estelle Elwood crossed his path.

With jealousy as the foundation of her feelings, when afterward Captain Corsala fell by the hand of his colonel in a duel he had forced his superior to fight, Juanita Corsala had at first vowed to be avenged upon the man she loved, and who had turned from her to another.

Feeling guiltless of having done any wrong or of having been the one to bring on the duel with her brother, and fearing that her jealous nature might cause her to strike at Estelle Elwood to punish him, Colonel Sandos had asked his good friend Texas Jack to go to the Corsala and tell the young girl the truth of the whole sad affair, for the

Texan Ranger had been his second in the fatal meeting.

So well had Texas Jack carried out his mission that Juanita Corsala felt that it was indeed her brother who had wronged his colonel beyond all forgiveness, and she frankly forgave Colonel Sandos and went to Fort Blanco and confessed to Estelle how she had plotted revenge against her, and returning to her grand old home, where she dwelt alone with her mother, made known her intention of retiring from the world into the walls of a convent.

The young colonel, pleased with the turn affairs had taken, and anxious to congratulate Colonel Elwood upon his victory over the Indians and the Robber Rangers up the Rio Grande, started from his hacienda one afternoon to visit Fort Blanco, his real object being to see the beautiful girl to whom he was engaged.

It was nearing the sunset hour as he approached the whirlpool ford of the Rio Grande, his favorite crossing in spite of its dangers, when suddenly a dark coil shot out over the top of a rock and the noose settling around his body pinioned his arms down to his side beyond the power to draw a weapon.

At the same time a form sprung from behind the rock, and grabbing his bridle rein leveled his revolver and cried:

"Do you surrender, Colonel Sandos?"

"I am no fool to throw my life away when I have no chance against you," was the reply.

"You are wise, senor, for I mean you no harm."

"Only to rob me, and kill me if I resist."

"You are wrong, senor, I mean you no harm whatever."

"Why then lasso me and hold me up, as you Texans call it, for you are no Mexican?"

"I am a Mexican by adoption, Colonel Sandos, for safety."

"That means a fugitive from justice."

"Yes, call it so."

"You speak Spanish, perfectly."

"Oh, yes, it was one of my studies, for strange to say I was educated for the ministry, and I speak French and German also; but it is not of myself I would talk, but of you."

"Well, senor?"

"You have enemies?"

"What man who is true to himself has not?"

"You are putting down outlawry upon the river border, and the Robber Rangers look upon you as their worst foe and hate you."

"I accept their hatred as an honor."

"It is thought that you gave Colonel Elwood information, through Texas Jack, that enabled the American soldiers to give the Robber Rangers the crushing defeats they met with a short time since."

"I only wish I could give the Americans more aid in their good work."

"Well, colonel, as I told you, my halting you was an act of friendship."

"Strange friendship."

"Yes, apparently, yet sincere, as waiting across the ford for you are half a dozen Robber Rangers, with orders to shoot you when half-way over, so that you will be supposed to have been lost there."

"Ha! you know this?"

"I do."

"How?"

"I gave the order for them to go there."

"You?"

"Yes, I am the captain of the Robber Rangers. They have determined to kill you, so I gave the order, and then came here to warn you."

"Had I halted you differently, you would have fired upon me, so I lassoed you to save you."

CHAPTER IX.

THE OUTLAWS' WARNING.

COLONEL SANDOS regarded the man as though to read him through, for he could hardly believe his own ears, when he heard what he did.

He looked into the man's face as one who reads human nature well, and then said:

"Well, my outlaw captain, if you have spoken truly I owe you a deep debt of grati-

tude, though for what reason I am at a loss to understand."

"I will tell you, sir."

"I am an American, as I said, and an outlaw as I cannot deny."

"I am known as the captain of the Robber Rangers—"

"Then you are El Sol?"

"No, El Sol is the chief, and I am the field officer, the one who does the work, and commands the band."

"Then you escaped death when you made your last raid into Mexico?"

"I was captured by Texas Jack when crossing the river, and I returned to Mexico to find that the Robber Rangers were by no means wiped out, so I am again their captain."

"It was thus I knew of their intention to take your life."

"I could not argue against it, so acquiesced, and sent the men to the ford to lie in ambush for you, while I came here to warn you."

"How did you know that I was to cross the ford?"

"Pardon me, senor, but your heart, all know, is across the river, in the keeping of the fair lady who nursed you back to life when you were badly wounded in defending her father and herself."

"All knew that you would soon go again to visit at Fort Blanco, and so the men were sent where you are known to cross the Rio Grande, to kill you."

"I wish you to turn aside here and cross by the ford above, and when I can I will try and influence my men against taking your life, giving some reason they must respect without compromising me."

"And why this interest in me, Senor Outlaw?"

"Because you love Miss Elwood, and she returns that love."

"A strange motive for an outlaw to be prompted by, surely."

"I am interested in the lady, yet just how I will not tell; but I do not wish sorrow to fall upon her when I can avert it."

"I therefore warn you, Senor Colonel, and it is for you to go your way by another ford, and save your life."

"And place myself under obligations to one whom I have tried to catch and hang for a year past."

"Yes, senor."

"Can I not cancel the debt by paying you at what you deem my life worth to you, for that would wipe out the obligation, and prevent any regret I might feel, any conscientious scruples against hanging you?"

"Senor Sandos, what would you say if I, an outlaw confessed, am yet a gentleman, and that I consider your words an insult."

"My dear senor, I retract them and beg your pardon," and Colonel Sandos saw that he had hurt the man keenly and held forth his hand in an honest effort to make atonement for doing so.

The outlaw captain grasped the outstretched hand and replied with feeling:

"You have not been misrepresented, Colonel Sandos, for you are the true type of a soldier and a gentleman."

"If you catch me, hang me, for I ask no mercy of any man."

"Now take the trail to the other ford, and let me advise that when you again cross into Texas you carry an escort with you, for you have deadly foes in the Robber Rangers' band."

"It seems cowardly to carry a guard with me," said the Mexican colonel in an annoyed tone.

"It is fatal not to do so."

"For your own sake, and that of Miss Elwood, I will protect you all in my power, but I have warned you of your danger, so be sure and heed it, senor."

"What is Miss Elwood to you?"

"No more than that she was kind to me, an outlaw, when a prisoner in the fort, and I overheard her words and shall never forget them, for they were addressed to an officer who was with her when she saw me."

"They were."

"A man with that face has not a bad heart, and if he be an outlaw who knows all that drove him to it."

"That she read you aright is proven by your actions to me."

"I shall tell her of my meeting you."

"Oh, no; do not speak of it, for were it

known to the band what I have done, I would die a death of torture."

"Good-by, Colonel Sandos—some day we may meet again."

"May it never be when I have to sit in judgment upon you, my friend," and the colonel rode on his way, taking the trail that led to the upper ford, while the outlaw, after a few minutes, went on toward the river by the way the Mexican had been traveling to certain death.

CHAPTER X.

TOLD IN CONFIDENCE.

BUCKSKIN SAM returned to the fort considerably impressed by his meeting with the outlaw, and the fact that he owed his life to him.

He arrived at the fort before noon and his first duty was to go to Surgeon Powell's quarters and ask him about his pard Texas Jack.

"He has fever, Buckskin Sam, is delirious and the wound is serious; but I believe he will come out of it all right, though the shock was a severe one."

"There is no chance of his being out for days then, sir?"

"Say weeks rather, Hall, for the fever will leave him very weak and must run its course."

"Well, Doctor Powell, I am glad it is no worse; but I believe there is work ahead to be done and I shall have to take Jack's place," and Buckskin Sam went to headquarters to report to Colonel Elwood, who said as he entered:

"What, back so soon, Hall?"

"Yes, colonel, and there is one blessing at least that Jack has been avenged."

"Then you killed his foe—he should have been hanged!"

"Oh, no, colonel, I did not kill him, in fact, he came in an ace of killing me," and Buckskin Sam told the story of the shot at the Mexican as he lay in ambush, and what followed.

"That man Parker is a mystery to me, Hall, as he was also to Texas Jack."

"He impressed me most favorably as a prisoner here, and I was glad to let him go, for Omohundro had promised him his liberty."

"It was a good deed, his saving you as he did, and stands to his credit should he again fall in our power."

"Do you know anything more about him?"

"Nothing, sir, save that he is a gentleman in bearing, and I rest under a debt of gratitude to him I fear I can never repay."

"Where has he gone?"

"Back to Mexico, sir, and my opinion is, Colonel Elwood, that the outlaws have been by no means wiped out."

"They had a very severe handling, Hall."

"Yes, sir, but it is easy to recruit more from the lawless element in Mexico, and as their leader was not taken he will be again in the field, you may rest assured, sir."

"All right, we will have to fight the devil again with fire, and as Texas Jack is laid up for weeks at least, you will have to be the one to take his place, Buckskin Sam, and glad am I that you are the man for the work."

"Thank you, sir, and I am ready for your orders whenever you wish me to begin work, sir."

"Well, rest for a day or two, and then I will give you a letter to Colonel Sandos of the Mexican Lancers, and who commands across the river."

"He is heart and hand with us in wiping out these raiders upon our shores, and you can tell him just what you think about the Robber Rangers and get his views upon the subject."

"At the same time you can take a glance at the Indians and see if they are plotting any mischief."

"Now get all the rest you can, for there is no telling when you may have to take the trail."

It was the next day after that Buckskin Sam was sent for to come to Colonel Elwood's quarters.

He found there a handsome, distinguished-looking gentleman to whom he was introduced, and the colonel then said:

"Colonel Sandos has just arrived, Buckskin Sam and he brings news which I am anxious you should hear, though remember, it is told you in the strictest confidence."

"I shall so regard it, sir," was the answer, and then Buckskin Sam heard the story of the holding up on the trail the night before of Colonel Sandos, and the warning he had received.

That the regard of the outlaw to save Miss Elwood from sorrow was one of the motives for his act, the colonel kept to himself, but added:

"Now I deemed it my duty, Señor Hall, to inform Colonel Elwood of what had happened, telling him that I could not betray the man to whom I owed so much, as it might cause him to suffer death at the hands of his own men; but Colonel Sandos begged me to acquaint you with the circumstances, as you were the one now to act in the place of Texas Jack, and I am glad to do so, for I feel that you will regard the communication as confidential."

"I certainly shall so regard it, señor, and I owe so much to Buck Parker myself I will be most anxious to guard him from any danger from his band."

"Still, I shall go to the river and back for the trails of the men he said were in ambush to see if such was really the case, or the outlaw was playing a part in his rescue of you, Colonel Sandos."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WRONG MAN.

THE view taken by Texas Jack, that there might have been method in the act of the outlaw in warning Colonel Sandos as he did, to curry some favor or gain a point to them not visible, was a surprise to both Colonel Elwood and the Mexican officer, the latter remarking:

"I had not thought of it in that light, Buckskin Sam."

"I may be wrong, sir, but I should like to be convinced that I am."

"What motive could he have, Buckskin Sam?" asked Colonel Elwood.

"Well, sir, I hardly know; but he was released by you and has returned to Mexico to resume his outlawry, and the chances seem favorable that he might fall into the hands of Colonel Sandos, and with the claim of having saved that officer's life, would be a strong thing in his favor."

"You are right there, Buckskin Sam," said the colonel, while the ranger asked the Mexican officer:

"Did he say, sir, that he was not the chief, El Sol?"

"He did decidedly, stating that he was the commander in the field."

"Then we must discover who this El Sol is, and I begin to feel that there will be much of interest in doing so."

"I shall return to-night, señor, so if you wish, I shall be glad to have you accompany me."

After a moment of thought Buckskin Sam rejoined:

"I will start at once, sir, and you will find me at the Whirlpool Ford, for I will be on the watch for you, señor."

Half an hour after Buckskin Sam rode out upon the splendid horse that had brought him there with Texas Jack borne in his arms, and which had become thoroughly rested after his long journey.

He took the trail leading to the dangerous ford, and rode at a pace that would bring him there before night.

Seeking a camping-place he staked his horse out, found a good point of observation and began to thoroughly search the other shore with his glass.

Just as he was about to take his glass from his eyes a horseman appeared in sight coming toward the river on the other shore, and at once Buckskin Sam saw three men spring from cover and run along in a crawling attitude as though to head him off.

They suddenly slipped down behind a rock, and one of them quickly raised his rifle, but ere he had taken aim the Texan Ranger had thrown aside his glass, his weapon was at his shoulder, and his hand pulled trigger.

With a yell of pain the man sprung to his feet, while the others following his example

threw up their hands as the horseman spurred toward them, his revolver in hand.

But Buckskin Sam had already thrown himself into his saddle and was dashing down the steep trail to the ford.

As he crossed he beheld a scene that surprised him, for there sat the horseman quietly in his saddle, while the three men who had intended ambushing him, stood cowed before him, one writhing in pain as he grasped his shattered arm.

What was said Buckskin Sam did not catch, but as he rode out of the river and joined the group, he looked with unconcealed admiration upon the horseman, whom he had saved from the assassin's bullet.

He was splendidly mounted, and his Mexican saddle and bridle were heavy with silver decoration.

The man was dressed in velvet, embroidered in silver, his sombrero alone being worth a small fortune, and his attire from head to feet was gorgeous, rich and costly.

His revolvers were gold-mounted, and as he wore jewels and a handsome gold watch and chain he was well worthy the attention of any trail robber.

His face was a striking one, a face to command admiration, respect, and fear perhaps.

It was a face that would win a woman, and that a man dared not sneer at on account of its perfect outline, for it was manly, though cruel, and its expressions were as variable as April weather.

"Ah, señor, it is to you I owe it that I was not murdered, and now the cowards tell me they mistook me for Colonel Sandos, and meant not to kill me."

"Permit me to introduce myself as Don Marlo Fuentes, better known perhaps as the Avenging Duelist, and the Ranchero King—you are in time to see how I treat those who would put me out of the way," and almost as his words were spoken, and ere Buckskin Sam could raise hand to check him, one of the gold-mounted revolvers of the Ranchero King was thrown forward and three quick shots dropped the trio of Mexicans in their tracks.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RANCHERO KING.

THE blood rushed hotly into the face of Buckskin Sam at the unexpected and cruel act of the Ranchero King, and he was about to make a very decided remark as to his opinion of it when Don Marlo Fuentes said:

"Now, señor, you may deem me hasty in what I did, but let me tell you that those three men are members of the Robber Ranger band, though they are in my employ on my ranch up in the mountains as cowboys."

"My herds are large, my horses are numbered by the thousand, and I employ several hundred horsemen on my several ranches."

"Of course where there are so many men some are lawless, and I have suffered much from the fact that the Robber Rangers have recruited their outlaws from my herds."

"After Colonel Elwood's blow upon them I had spies at the fords, and I spotted the men who were in that raid into Texas, and those three men were under my eyes as guilty."

"They came here to kill Colonel Sandos, for the simple reason that he does his duty in putting down lawlessness, and as we do not appear unlike at a glance, and they were in ambush for him, they were going to kill me, and you saved my life."

"They have met deserved punishment at my hands and three outlaws are put out of way."

"I have no other explanation to offer, señor—may I ask your name?"

Buckskin Sam was interested in the Ranchero King in spite of himself.

He had heard much of the man, the Avenging Duelist, Millionaire Ranchero and Ranchero King, as he was variously called.

He had now a chance to see just what he was when he felt himself wronged.

His explanation had shown the situation from his stand-point, but it did not justify his taking the lives of the three men as he had done.

It revealed that he regarded human life as cheap indeed, and that he did not hesitate to kill did he consider that he had reason for so doing.

"My name is Sam Hall, señor, and I am a Texan captain of a Ranger Company, but, perhaps I am better known as Buckskin Sam," said the Texan quietly, and while the Ranchero King had been talking, giving his explanation, he had been studying the situation and had decided that he would not resent his deadly act upon the three men, as it had at first been his intention to do.

"Ah! so you are the captain of the Texan Rangers are you, señor?"

"I have heard much of you, indeed, and am glad to meet you."

"Another time I hope we may meet again, for it is my wish to have you visit me at my Hacienda Del Monte."

"Now I must ride on, for I go to Fort Blanco to-night, and wish to reach there before it is late."

"Adios, señor, and accept my heartfelt gratitude for your service to me."

The Ranchero King extended his hand, Buckskin Sam grasped it and they parted.

The Ranchero King rode right into the river with the air of one who knew the ford well, and Buckskin Sam continued on until he came to a place of concealment, where he halted, turned about and saw the Mexican cross the river in safety, ascend the trail on the other side and not once seem curious enough to look behind him.

"Well, he's a dandy," said the Texan, aloud.

"He's the strangest customer I ever met, handsome as a picture, courtly as a knight, cool as an icicle, for he planted his bullets in exactly the same spot in the face of each of those men."

"I was tempted to let him have a shot, but am glad I did not try it on."

"He settled the accounts of that trio of outlaws, and I shall not be chief mourner at their funeral."

"They were in ambush for Colonel Sandos, that is certain, three instead of six, as the outlaw captain told the colonel."

"Well, I'll bury them, and then camp on the other shore and talk it over with the colonel, who will doubtless meet this Ranchero King and hear what was done."

"In all my experience on the border this matches any I have ever known."

"Now to have a look at those fellows whom the Ranchero King did not even glance at after killing them."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OUTLAWS' BOOTY.

BUCKSKIN SAM ran his glass over the other shore, to see if the Ranchero King was watching him.

As he did not see him, he having ridden from sight, he concluded to take a look across the river and see more, for he did not care to be seen looking about for trails and also examining the dead bodies of the three men.

Crossing the river, he hitched his horse, and went up the trail on foot.

He saw by the trail of the horse of the Ranchero King, that he had halted when sure he was out of sight, and hitching his horse, he had gone to where he could get a look at the other shore.

Not seeing Buckskin Sam, he had continued on, as the tracks showed he had halted but a short while.

With his glass Buckskin Sam soon discovered him far off on the trail, riding at a gallop toward Fort Blanco.

"He is safe; but he did stop to see if I was going on or had halted."

"Now to recross the river," and Buckskin Sam descended to where he had left his horse, and soon after had staked him out while he took a look at the three outlaws.

"Yes, dead-shot shooting that, each hit regularly between the eyes."

"Now to see what they have with them."

It cannot be said that Buckskin Sam was surprised at his find, for he half suspected he would make the discovery that the men were indeed outlaws, had he held any doubt of the fact.

But what he found seemed to please him, as he got from them half a dozen watches of various kinds, chains, jewelery, a bag of gold, another of silver, and a roll of American bank-notes.

"This beats being a Texas Ranger, that is."

certain; but the game was brought down by the Ranchero King, and I must divvy with him.

"It will give me a chance to visit him, and I have a decided curiosity to know more about the man.

"Ah! this is a beautiful ring, and it has a name—Juanita Corsala—and here is a miniature studded with diamonds—whew! but she is a beautiful woman, and here is some engraving upon it, too," and he read:

"VIOLET TO PARKE."

Beneath it were the words engraven:

"MY GUARDIAN ANGEL."

"These two, the ring and the miniature, stamp them in a way that tempts me to keep them, hoping to find the ones they belong to, so I will place them aside, while the rest of the booty I will show to the Ranchero King."

He placed the miniature and the ring in an inner pocket and bundled the rest of the booty up in a silk handkerchief and put it in the saddle pocket.

Then he set to work to bury the dead in a sandy spot not far away, heaping rocks over their shallow graves to protect them from the coyotes.

"Now to find their horses," he said, and he began to search for trails.

After half an hour he made the discovery that there had been six men on the watch there, and the tracks of their horses led away from the spot, while he saw the tracks of one horse having come there.

He read this to mean that the man that Colonel Sandos had met had really come to the ford, ordered the men away, and that three of them had returned from some reason and met their fate there.

Then he gathered up the three horses staked out up the river-bank a short distance, and was starting for the ford when his quick eye detected there were some men approaching the ford, coming by the same trail that the Texan had discovered led from the place where six horses had been staked out.

"I have not time to retreat across the river, and those fellows look like the pards of the trio the Ranchero King killed.

"I guess I'll stand at bay and take the chances at a racket," and Buckskin Sam at once sought cover and awaited the coming of the three horsemen.

CHAPTER XIV.

PLAYING A BOLD HAND.

"THEY are three to one, but I hold the position and the drop on them, so that about evens up matters," muttered Buckskin Sam as he placed his repeating rifle in position and waited for the coming of the three horsemen.

Finding that he could not have retreated by the river ford without being seen, and to have taken the trail on into Mexico would but place him at a disadvantage with the three men, if they tracked him, Buckskin Sam had taken the wisest course to make a stand.

If they passed his position without seeing him, well and good; but if they discovered him then he would play a bold hand to win a game that could not but be a deadly one.

The position taken by Buckskin Sam was a pile of rocks just out of the entrance to a canyon, and gave him command of his foes for over a hundred yards, while there was no place of shelter for them, no cover to which they could retreat and open fire upon him.

To get out of the canyon they must ride by within twenty feet of his position.

With a calmness which long experience to danger had taught, he waited for the three men, who came into sight riding abreast and talking together in a way that showed they felt no dread of danger.

As Buckskin Sam spoke Spanish perfectly, he heard what they said and smiled in a grim way as he muttered:

"Yes, your three comrades are here, pards, but you will get no welcome from them."

"I will do the honors in their stead."

Nearer and nearer they came, and as Buckskin Sam saw their faces he muttered:

"Three of a kind and just the fellows for the inside of a prison or a hangman."

"Where are they?" said one of the three, and another answered:

"I will call them."

He raised his voice and shouted:

"Ho, comrades, we are here!"

"Hands up all of you!" cried Buckskin Sam, thrusting his rifle over the rocks and thus calling attention to his presence.

He had cleverly put the rifles of the three dead men in position, and as he gave the command the men heard also in a lower tone, also in Spanish:

"Do not fire, men, unless they resist or attempt to fly."

The three men were dazed at the suddenness of the danger they had ridden upon, and being at a halt they looked helplessly about them, each one feeling that a movement toward resistance would mean his death.

"Hands up!" again shouted Buckskin Sam, and like one man their arms were raised above their heads.

Buckskin Sam was pleased, and at once decided to take in the party.

"Dismount, you fellow on the right, and come here, but do not lower your hands!"

The man obeyed, advanced slowly to the rocks and Buckskin Sam said, as though addressing comrades:

"Keep them covered, and fire only if you have to."

The man disappeared in the rocks and in an instant he was disarmed and bound with one end of a lariat.

But he had solved the secret of the pointing rifles, that there was no one behind them, and he shouted:

"Ho, pards, it's a blind to catch us."

"There is but one little fellow here—charge in and kill him!"

His words were checked by a blow in the mouth that loosened several teeth and knocked him down, and putting his foot upon him Buckskin Sam turned to face the other two who did charge upon him, firing as they came.

A shot brought one of the men out of his saddle, and as the third, alarmed by the fate of his comrade, wheeled his horse in flight he came to grief, for Buckskin Sam's fatal lariat was thrown with unerring aim and the man was caught and dragged out of his saddle, falling heavily.

Quickly leaping from the rocks the Texan, with another of the lariats taken from the men killed by the Ranchero King, bound the half-stunned man and then captured the horses which had gone but a short distance down the canyon.

There was no need to see if the one he had shot was dead, for the Ranger knew too well that he was, for his aim never failed him.

"Well, I've got another burial on my hands, three more to search, three more good horses and their outfits, and two prisoners, and my best plan is to get across the river with all haste," muttered Buckskin Sam; but as he uttered the words, he heard the rapid clatter of approaching hoofs.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OUTLAW CAPTAIN.

It was too late for Buckskin Sam to get his prisoners, his dead man and the horses out of sight, though he could seek shelter himself.

This he did and just as he was once more at bay in the rocks, a horseman rode rapidly into view.

He drew rein quickly as he beheld the three horses, the prostrate form of the dead man and the one bound in the coils of the lasso, as he had been dragged from his saddle.

"It is my outlaw pard, Buck Parker!" cried Buckskin Sam, as he recognized the man, and raising his voice, he called out:

"Ho, Pard Parker, ride on, for there is no quarrel between you and I, though I've just had a picnic with some of your men."

"Buckskin Sam!" cried the outlaw captain as he saw the Ranger, and he rode forward at a gallop.

"What does it mean, Mr. Hall?" he asked as he cast his eyes quickly over the scene.

"It means, pard, that if these men are members of your band, you will have to recruit mighty soon, for I can show you the grave of three more of them not far from this spot."

"They attacked you then, and single-handed, you worsted them?"

"Oh, no, they did not attack me, I attacked them, at least these three here, but the others were wiped out by the Ranchero King."

"The Ranchero King killed them?" cried Buck Parker, in an amazed tone.

"Yes; you know him?"

"I know of him, and have seen him."

"I'll tell you how it was," and Buckskin Sam told the story to suit himself, that he was scouting, saw the ambush from across the river, fired as the Ranchero King came into sight, and crossing found him with the man his shot had wounded, and the two others prisoners.

"He appointed himself judge, jury and executioner, and shot them dead as they stood before him, and then coolly rode on his way, leaving me to bury them."

"That is his style, I have heard, and he has taken more lives than any three men on the border."

"But you say they mistook him for Colonel Sandos?"

Before Buckskin Sam could reply one of the prisoners said:

"Yes, and they look alike, too, and I'll tell you right out, Captain Parker, now that we are not in your power, that when you played traitor and warned Colonel Sandos of the plot to kill him, and ordered us away from the ford, our three pards came back to secretly do the work for him and avenge our comrades he has had slain."

"We know you as a traitor now, captain, and the word will go to the band that you are one, mark my words, and I am only sorry one of us did not keep on to the retreat and report you."

The outlaw captain's face did not change under this charge, and he replied calmly:

"Your charging me with being a traitor is no proof, while I warned Colonel Sandos I now admit, as for you to have killed that man would have sent ten thousand Mexican soldiers to this frontier and brought death upon us all, as this gentleman can tell you."

"You came back here when I left you, to see the work of your three comrades, and share in the booty you hoped they had gotten from Colonel Sandos."

"I suspected you and followed, and so you discovered that the Ranchero King killed your comrades, and this Ranger Captain of Texas has laid low one of your number and holds two of you prisoners, with the fair prospect that you will be hanged."

"So be it, I leave you in his keeping, and, as there is no quarrel between the Texan and myself, I will go my way—senor, adios," and the outlaw captain wheeled his horse to ride away, halted and called back:

"The sooner you place the Rio Grande between you and Mexico, Senor Buckskin Sam, the better."

"Leave the body of that fellow lying where he fell, for I will see that he is buried," and thus saying the outlaw captain rode on.

"I'll take his advice, and lose no time about it—you go with me though," said the Ranger, and he mounted his prisoners upon their horses, took the other animals in lead and rode rapidly toward the ford.

He crossed to the other shore, ascended the steep trail and went into camp upon the cliffs, at the place of a former encampment, and began preparations for a night's stay, expecting soon to be joined by Colonel Sandos.

CHAPTER XVI.

"DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES."

THE Ranger was in no particular hurry in getting supper ready, as a glance over the trail with his glass had not shown the colonel in sight.

He had his two prisoners firmly secured, and their horses all staked out near his own, so that he felt perfectly secure from danger, as he had no reason to dread a crossing of Mexicans from the other shore.

The coming upon the scene of the outlaw captain had been a surprise to him, and a gratification.

The words of the outlaws had convinced him that their captain had acted in good faith after all with Colonel Sandos in war.

ing him of danger, and not from any motive that was underhand.

That his own men had considered him to have acted a treacherous part was proof of his wish to bring no harm upon those in whom he had any interest.

When at last the sun went down and the colonel did not appear, Buckskin Sam grew a little anxious regarding him.

He knew that he was alone, and had expected to cross the ford in daylight, and the Ranger felt that there was cause for anxiety, as other outlaws might have laid in wait for him upon the Texas shore to take his life.

He felt some relief in the thought that the Ranchero King was going over the trail the colonel was to come and then would meet him, and if anything was wrong could report it to the fort.

At last he decided to eat supper, putting the colonel's aside for him.

So he called to the two prisoners:

"Supper is ready and I'll release your hands so that you can eat, but any funny business on your part will get you into serious trouble, I warn you."

"We know you, Senor Buckskin Sam, and are not fools to throw our lives away," said one of the Mexicans.

"All right, see that you don't."

With this he bound the ankles of his prisoners and relieved them of the bonds upon their arms, after which he placed a good supper before them while he ate his own, his revolver cocked by his side, for he did not know at what moment the two men, at a signal, might spring upon him.

"Say, pards, why did you call your captain a traitor?" asked the Ranger in an indifferent tone.

"Because he warned Colonel Sandos that we were lying in ambush to kill him, after he gave us orders to go to the ford to do so."

"How do you know that he warned him?"

"He came to the place where we were and said that the colonel must not be killed and ordered us away.

"The man just killed accused him of not dealing 'fair' with us, and he said that he would take the responsibility of his action with the chief."

"You mean El Sol?"

"Yes."

"And it was your intention to tell the band that he was a traitor?"

"It was, and is, and let me tell you that we'll see that the band finds it out in some way, for his death will follow, as our chief is not one to be trifled with."

"Who is your chief?"

"I don't know."

"You mean that you know but will not tell?"

"No, I don't know."

"Do you?" and Buckskin Sam turned to the other prisoner.

"I do not."

"You have a suspicion, though?"

"No, for some say that the captain is the chief, that there really is no one else, and that it is said there is, only to make the men more afraid to disobey orders, not knowing who has secretly their eye upon them."

"How many men have you in your band?"

"We will not answer."

"Will you not tell where your retreat is?"

"No."

"You met with a severe defeat at the hands of American soldiers a short while since?"

"We never count our dead men, only the living," was the significant reply.

And just then, out of the darkness surrounding the camp-fire came two quick flashes and the whir of bullets.

With a groan the head of one of the outlaws dropped forward, and he rolled over upon his side, while the second sprung to his feet and fell his length as a wild cry broke from his lips.

In an instant Buckskin Sam had darted to cover, but no other shots came, no sound was heard out in the darkness, and at last the Ranger decided that whoever had fired upon the prisoners had gone.

"I will push for the fort and lose no time about it," he muttered to himself, and at once he went to bring up the horses and saddle them.

When he returned leading his own and the

outlaws' horses, to his surprise he beheld a stick near the fire with a slip of paper upon it.

Taking the paper he read what was written on it in a bold hand:

"Dead men tell no tales."

"I am no traitor so will not suffer the penalty of one." B. P."

"It was Buck Parker the outlaw captain who killed them."

"Well, I will still push for the fort, as I am growing anxious about Colonel Sandos, and I will carry the dead outlaws with me," and half an hour after Buckskin Sam started upon the trail for Fort Blanco.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COLONEL'S FAIR ESCORT.

TRUE to his promise to Buckskin Sam Colonel Sandos decided to start early, and though Colonel Elwood offered him an escort of cavalry to the river he declined it, especially as Estelle Elwood said:

"I have already arranged for an escort, father."

"Indeed, and what troop have you ordered out?" asked the colonel with a smile.

"Troop I, sir, Captain Delle De Silva commanding," was the quick response, and the two officers laughed, as Troop I meant herself, and Delle De Silva was Estelle's chum at the fort, the niece of the second officer in rank at the fort, Major Gayle Gorman.

"Well, my child, I suppose you two girls will have your way, and Sandos, you could not have a fairer escort."

"There is no danger now of Indians or road-agents, and I know you will know just how far to let your escort go."

"I'll send them back after a few miles, Colonel Elwood, and I certainly feel honored by such an escort," the Mexican officer replied.

Half an hour after the colonel and the two young ladies rode away from the fort, one on either side of him.

Estelle and Delle De Silva were both perfect horsewomen; and two more beautiful girls it would be hard to find.

In appearance, save in beauty of face and form, they were totally unlike, but their tastes and dispositions were strangely similar and from their first meeting they had been devoted friends.

There were a number of young officers who would have been most happy to have offered their services to escort the young ladies back to the fort, but they were not asked, or even aware of their going.

It was simply an arrangement for them to accompany the Mexican colonel a few miles and then return alone, and they were glad of the freedom they would have all to themselves.

Of course it had become an acknowledged fact that Estelle Elwood was pledged to the rich and handsome young Mexican colonel, and he had won the respect and friendship of all who knew him in the fort.

But Delle De Silva was supposed to be heart whole and fancy free, and she had many suitors for her hand.

The colonel was anxious to reach the river and cross before nightfall, and he set a brisk pace when they left the fort, but none too brisk for his fair escorts, for all ladies are fast and hard riders.

They had gone several miles, and the flag flying over the fort had just disappeared behind a ridge, when Colonel Sandos drew rein and said:

"As much as I enjoy the company of my fair escort, I must dismiss it now and order its return at once to the fort, and that means that you are to obey orders, with no wandering from the straight trail."

"What a strict commander you must be, a regular martinet; but suppose we refuse obedience, Senor Colonel?" answered Delle De Silva.

"I shall consider you both under arrest, and return with you to the fort."

"Under those circumstances, Delle, we had better rebel, for then it will be too late for Colonel Sandos to keep his mysterious engagement, which he says he has at the river, and he will have to remain all night," Estelle said.

"No, I must go on, and you must return now, young ladies," and the colonel spoke seriously, adding:

"Promise me, Senorita Estelle, that you will go straight back on the trail."

"But it is not a straight trail."

"I am sure that you both have formed a plan for a long ride around, but it must not be, alone as you are."

They saw that he was in earnest, promised that they would stick to the direct trail, and bidding him farewell started upon their return.

But he had not ridden half a mile when he was startled by the rapid clatter of hoofs behind him, and turning in his saddle he saw the two maidens riding at the full speed of their horses toward him, and waving to him.

Instantly he wheeled and rode to meet them, when clear and distinct came Estelle's voice:

"We are pursued by Indians and cut off from the fort."

"There are all of thirty of them."

The face of the brave soldier paled at these words, for though he could meet any fate fearlessly, what might those two defenseless maidens be called upon to face should they fall into the power of the cruel Comanches.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

WHEN Estelle and Delle De Silva reached the side of the colonel, all traces of anxiety had disappeared from his fine face.

He met them with a smile and called out:

"Is this the trail to Fort Blanco?"

"Oh, Sandos, you believe we are joking, but far from it, for we saw Indians upon our trail and between us and the fort," cried Estelle.

"Yes, see! they are coming now," called out Miss De Silva, and the colonel glanced over the ridge and saw a party of red-skin horsemen dash into view.

"We are well mounted and must outride them."

"Of course, we cannot go to the fort, so will ride to the ford, and there we will find Buckskin Sam, whom I was to meet, so that was my mysterious engagement, Miss Estelle."

"Come, settle yourselves well in your saddles, grasp your reins and let us be off, for they are almost within rifle range."

They rode upon each side of him, and the three sped rapidly on, the Indians, evidently splendidly mounted, pressing on in hot pursuit and not a quarter of a mile away.

"It will be a long, hard ride to the ford, young ladies, but there we will meet one of the bravest Indian-fighters on either side of the Rio Grande, and the country admits of making a stand there if we have to do so."

"If we have ample time to cross we will do so, and the red-skins will hardly venture to follow, and it will not be long before you are safe in my quarters."

"If we make a stand on this side, there will be relief along from the fort before night, for should you not soon return Colonel Elwood will quickly send in search of you."

"Under these circumstances keep up stout hearts, for all will be well."

The young girls were much cheered by his words, though Estelle said:

"We would prefer to make a stand on this side, Colonel Sandos, when we join Buckskin Sam, for we know what he is, and his repeating rifle will do deadly work."

"It will indeed, senorita, and I feel that we can stand them off easily; but Buckskin Sam will know what is best to be done, and he is a host in himself."

The Indians in pursuit, a glance backward told the colonel, were about thirty in number, and that they were well mounted on splendid and well-rested ponies, the fact that they had slightly gained upon the fugitives proved.

Suddenly the fine horse ridden by the colonel trod on a stone, it rolled with him and he wrenched one of his legs so that for a moment he went along with a hop.

"Too bad, for he is hopelessly lame."

"You ride on hard for the river, and Texas Jack will meet you," cried the colonel as his horse hopped painfully along.

"And you?" calmly asked Estelle

"I will reach yonder hill-top and make a stand there, for it is a splendid position."

"We will not desert you," said Estelle firmly.

"For God's sake go on, for should I fall I will only meet a soldier's fate."

"You don't know us, Colonel Sandos, if you think we would desert a friend in distress."

"We have our revolvers and will make the stand with you," Delle De Silva said in very decided tones.

In vain did the colonel plead, the girls were determined, and so the three rode for the hill-top, the injured horse limping most painfully.

The spot was reached, and it was found to afford a fair shelter, and command the approach on every side.

They quickly dismounted, the colonel placing them in positions to protect them, and then, with a revolver in each hand turning to face his foes.

Even at that moment they could not but admire his sublime courage, the look upon his face to die there and then defending them from a fearful fate, and with no thought of himself.

The Indians had gained meanwhile, and were now rushing on with wild yells of triumph, for they believed their game was in their hands.

But suddenly a loud shout was heard in the opposite direction, and turning quickly they beheld a horseman riding toward them at the full speed of his horse and wildly waving his sombrero.

"It is the Ranchero King!" shouted Colonel Sandos and he looked eagerly behind him to see if others were following him.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GALLANT SACRIFICE.

ON came the Indians, lashing their horses, and shouting wildly in their triumph, and on came the horseman on the other side, riding like the wind, and waving his sombrero.

Thus far the red-skins had not seen the Ranchero King, as the rise divided them, but when a moment after he dashed into view they quickly drew rein.

They seemed to look for more to come."

The delay gave Colonel Sandos a chance to become more securely situated, in their temporary retreat, and the next moment the Ranchero King rode up.

He was the same handsome, courtly, stern-faced, yet sinister man, not in the least degree excited by the situation, and he said in his suave manner:

"I am glad to see the señoritas and Colonel Sandos, though I regret to find them in danger.

"I saw your unfortunate situation and came to share it with you, believing I could render better service here than in riding for aid and returning too late."

"You are a noble man, Don Fuentes, to sacrifice yourself for us, when you could have escaped," said Estelle, offering her hand.

"Yes, Don Marlo, I appreciate your sacrifice, for it would have been too late to have sought aid from the fort, while perhaps together we can stand off the Indians."

"I have my rifle, and we will do our best."

"Your coming has already checked the Indians, señor," Delle De Silva remarked.

"It is but temporary, for they expected others were following me."

"See, they are already circling around to surround us, and then will begin the attack."

"I await your orders, Colonel Sandos."

"You are too old an Indian-fighter, Don Marlo, young as you are, to need instructions from me, and right glad am I of your aid I assure you."

"We are fairly well protected here, and the young ladies can keep in shelter and load our weapons as we empty them."

"You have a repeating rifle, I see, and it is doubtless long range."

"Yes, sir!" and quick as a flash the butt of the rifle touched the shoulder and the finger touched the trigger as he said quietly:

"I'll kill that chief on the left."

With the crack of the rifle the chief was seen to sway in his saddle, clutch at the mane of his horse and then fall to the ground, while a perfect storm of yells of fury were heard as the red-skins saw the act.

But it gave them a very decided idea of a long range rifle, and they quickly widened their circle and the leader gathered in a group of several warriors and began to discuss the situation.

"I will have to depend wholly upon my revolvers, having no rifle with me," said Colonel Sandos.

"They will be most deadly at short range, for I have heard of your unerring aim, Señor Colonel," the Ranchero King said, while Estelle remarked:

"Yes, and I have seen Colonel Sandos's deadly aim, for we have been under fire together before this, señor."

"Yes, señorita, and I had hoped never would be again; but the Indians are preparing for a dash, so it would be well to try your rifle again upon them, Don Marlo."

The Ranchero King at once obeyed, and his rifle was fired radidly half a dozen times, he wheeling from one side to the other.

A warrior dropped from his saddle, another wounded, a pony killed and a falling back still further of the others was the result.

"Bravo, Don Marlo, you are thinning their ranks, for there were thirty-one, and these are to be deducted from that number," Delle De Silva said, while Estelle cried:

"Look out! here they come!"

It was true, for having completed their line about the hill, the Indians suddenly turned their horses straight for the hilltop.

At once the Ranchero King threw his rifle to his shoulder and began to pump out the deadly bullets.

He fired rapidly, but not aimlessly, and he looked manly beyond compare as he stood there unsheltered, having stepped out from among the rocks, dealing death about him, and even in that moment of dread suspense he won the admiration of Colonel Sandos and the young girls, whose fate depended upon the two men.

CHAPTER XX.

BEATEN BACK.

THE Comanches stood the leaden hail like heroes until they saw that there was no firing at random, but a steady, unerring aim of that deadly rifle, and then they began to slacken their pace, just as Colonel Sandos sprung out of cover and opened with his revolvers.

He, too, threw no shots away, and when both Estelle and Delle De Silva coolly brought their revolvers into play the red-skins were staggered, reeled back and fled, sending showers of arrows at the brave party of little defenders upon the hilltop.

"Bravo, Don Marlo! you did splendid work, and when the señoritas joined in the battle the red-skins could not stand it," said Colonel Sandos, dragging an arrow out of his arm without a change of countenance at the pain it gave him.

But Estelle saw the act and at once constituted herself surgeon of the party, ordering the colonel to take off his coat, roll up his sleeve, and then she dressed the wound most skillfully.

The Ranchero King took up the arrow, glanced at it and said:

"I am glad that it is not poisoned, not only for your sake, señor, but my own, for I have a wound also for you to dress, Señorita Elwood, if you will be so kind," and throwing off his elegant, embroidered jacket he revealed a wound in the shoulder.

"It struck me at a time when I feared they would break in upon our fire, but it is nothing," he said lightly.

This wound was also skillfully dressed, Delle giving up her handkerchief for a bandage, and the canteen of the Ranchero King supplying water.

One of the horses had also been shot by the shower of arrows and was dying, but it happened to be the animal of Colonel Sandos, and which could not move on account of its injured leg which had checked their flight.

The Ranchero King had a lunch with him and he passed it around for supper, all, however, watching the next move of the red-skins.

"What do you think they will do next, señor?" asked Delle De Silva of Colonel Sandos.

"They have lost half a dozen of their warriors, and others wounded, so will be most cautious about attacking again, and will wait until in the night, hoping to catch us off our guard."

"It looks to me, señor, as though they had comrades near, for I saw two Indian warriors start off just now, one taking the trail toward the fort, to watch for any soldiers coming to the rescue, the other bearing off to the right as though to look up another band."

"Yes, you are right, and they will give us a respite until their friends come up."

"I will kill my poor horse and get him out of his misery, and his body and the saddle will serve as a breastwork, for we need all the defense we can get," said Colonel Sandos, and both Estelle and Delle turned their faces away as they saw the colonel advance to where his horse lay dying.

He patted him affectionately a moment, spoke a word of farewell, and then thrust his long, slender blade into his heart, the horse dying instantly with a low moan.

"How terrible war is, and how stern and seemingly cruel it makes mankind," said Estelle in a low tone.

"Yes, Estelle, but as long as human beings exist there will be war."

"Education but increases the methods for taking human life, and those people who believe people can live on earth and not quarrel, fight and kill, are cranks," and Colonel Sandos, and the Ranchero King laughed heartily at Delle's way of clinching her argument.

Night came on and soon after the quick ear of the ranchero caught a sound far away.

"Their reinforcements are coming, Colonel Sandos, and in a run!" he said.

"Or relief from the fort," was the hopeful reply.

"I hear the hoof falls distinctly."

"That is not the sound of iron-shod hoofs, colonel, but unshod ponies, for there is no ring to it, only dull thud."

"You are right, señor, and you are a close observer."

"Yes, the Indians are to be reinforced, though not in large numbers."

"No, I should say from the sound that there are not over a score of them, doubtless the balance of the hunting party which pursued you."

All listened attentively now, and the Indian reinforcements were heard to come up at a gallop, halt, and then followed the sound of voices in low tones out upon the plain.

CHAPTER XXI.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS.

THE little party awaited anxiously the result of the Indian reinforcements.

Both Estelle and Delle De Silva were perfectly calm, but they could not but feel the great strain upon them.

All depended upon their two gallant defenders, both of whom were cheerful and never once spoke of their wounds.

They had beaten back their foes, and dealt upon them most deadly blows; but could they do so again?

Would not a larger force of Indians, as now there undoubtedly were, break in upon them and the end be quick and sure?

Why did not help come from the fort?

Surely the colonel must have grown anxious and sent help to them, they argued.

Yet no help came, none was in sight, not a sound in the distance gave them hope.

The colonel was particularly cheery and told light stories, the Ranchero King joining in the laughter and now and then making some witty remarks.

To both Estelle and Delle De Silva he was an enigma, a man impossible to fathom.

He had said that he was on his way to the fort to make a visit upon Colonel Elwood and the young ladies.

Living the life of a self-imposed exile as he had done, he now appeared to be willing to come out of his seclusion and meet Americans, though his own race he seemed to utterly ignore, save the exception of Colonel Sandos.

An avenging duelest, his hand red with the

blood of more than a score of men killed to satisfy a bygone hatred for a wrong, he also had a quick way of silencing foes, and yet was as gentle-mannered as a padre and his voice was low and musical in every utterance.

As though his conscience held no dark stains of human life, he sat there with those he had bravely come to defend and share the fate of, cool, gentle and watchful for the death-struggle he knew must come sooner or later.

In spite of his deadly record, both the maidens admired him and felt drawn toward him by feelings of real friendship.

Thus they waited until one, two, three hours after night fall had dragged their weary length along.

"Would it not be a good idea, Don Marlo, to show those Comanches that we are not asleep, that they need not expect to surprise us?" said Colonel Sandos, and he added:

"I heard them moving just now, as though preparing for a rush."

In response Don Marlo Fuentes handed over to the colonel his rifle with the remark:

"Try them, senor."

"It is a shot in the dark, yet may tell with a life."

He did not appear anxious to fire, as though he wished to take life himself wantonly, as it was said of him was the case.

Colonel Sandos took the rifle, stood up, listened an instant, then facing to the northward fired three shots in quick succession.

Then he turned to the South and three more were sent flying out into the darkness.

Three more to the East, and a like number to the West were quickly sent, until twelve had been fired at random.

But the Ranchero King said quietly:

"Some of those shots told, senor—load as quickly as possible."

The rifle was loaded and returned to its owner just as there came a sound of falling hoofs, then the cries of two-score braves in savage fury and with a ring of hope, as they began to narrow the circle about the hilltop and come on to the attack.

"All ready now!

"They were preparing for a rush as I expected," cried Colonel Sandos as he faced the coming foes.

But out in the darkness of the plain the flashes of the repeating rifle had been seen, and it had told of men in danger.

The ringing shots had been heard, and they too told that men were at bay.

Then followed the sound of many hoofs, the wild war-cries of the Comanches, and the one who had seen and heard cried aloud:

"It is the colonel and the Ranchero King corralled by red-skins.

"With my half dozen outlaws' horses I can make a big show, so here's to the rescue."

And with his captive horses in lead, his repeating rifle flashing and his wild war-cry, so well known to the Comanches, and feared, Buckskin Sam alone rode to the rescue of the little party on the hilltop and shielded by the darkness.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE STAMPEDE.

THERE was nothing that the Comanches knew better or feared more than the Texas Rangers.

They trembled at their wild war-cries, for the daring Rangers were wont to strike terrible blows of retaliation when the Comanches raided the settlements, or went on the war-path, and time and again had boldly dashed into the Indian camps.

One Ranger was always dreaded by the Comanches, and when they were in force it meant certain death to the red-skin band they pounced down upon.

In their charge upon the little party upon the hilltop the band of Comanches, two-score in number, were wild with anticipated success.

Two men might cause a number of their braves to bite the dust, and bring down many ponies, but they could not check them, and victory would be theirs.

But in the moment of their triumph came the wild yell of the dreaded Ranger.

It rung out wildly, fiercely as though a number of Rangers were coming, and checking their ponies for an instant the Indians

heard the tramp of what seemed a number of hoofs.

Instantly victory was lost sight of, hope vanished and flight and safety alone was thought of.

Like one man, for it was the same impulse that governed all, the Comanches fled, hesitating only to carry off their wounded, and leaving their dead upon the field.

The repeating-rifle of the gallant Texan Ranger had rattled forth death upon the red-skins, fired into their midst at random as had been the case.

Away skinned the Comanches, and having started them in their flight Buckskin Sam pressed on in pursuit, darting here and there, and firing revolver and rifle, and also giving his war-cries, to make the red-skins believe there were a number of Rangers in chase of them.

But in the pursuit Buckskin Sam was quickly joined by Colonel Sandos and the Ranchero King, the latter using his repeating-rifle, the former having leaped upon the horse of Estelle Elwood.

Confident now that there were numbers in chase of them, the Comanches fairly stampeded, and then the pursuit was checked, Buckskin Sam calling out:

"Now, senors, we must ride for the fort, as they will soon see we are not in force, and there must be half a hundred of them."

"Yes, Senor Hall, and there are more of us, for your gallant rescue has been far more in its worth than you know, as the Senoritas Elwood and De Silva are yonder on the hilltop, awaiting us.

"Don Marlo came to our aid, and to share our fate with us, the two ladies and myself, and now you have saved us all from a fearful fate."

Buckskin Sam was delighted when he heard that he had saved the two young ladies also, and said quickly:

"We must lose no time now, senors, but return with all speed to the fort."

"But you have six riderless horses with you, Senor Hall?" said Don Marlo, the Ranchero King.

"You can account for three of them, senor, the other three are the horses of other outlaws who came to the ford and I made them prisoners, save one whom I killed."

"And where are the other two?"

"Strapped to the back of their horses, senor, for they are dead."

"You killed them too?"

"No, I did not, but some one else did, shot a couple of hours ago as they sat by the camp-fire at supper."

"You do not know who?"

"He fired from the darkness, senor, and I did not see him."

"Then it was that I decided to start for the fort, and fortunately was just in time."

"But we must be off now for the fort," and then the party returned to the top of the hill, the Ranchero King lighting a match and flashing the blaze into the face of each of the dead men.

"More of my own cowboys, I see—I must have a weeding out on my ranches," he said quietly, and those who knew him best understood well what that weeding out meant.

Both of the maidens were most earnest in expressing their gratitude to Buckskin Sam for his timely and daring rescue, and they were preparing to start for the fort, the colonel putting his saddle and bridle upon one of the Ranger's led horses.

"There is nothing to fear now—the troopers are coming," suddenly cried Buckskin Sam, his keen sense of hearing having caught the sound of approaching hoofs.

"I will let them know where we are," and he fired his revolver in the air.

It was answered by a cheer and the troopers rode at a charge for the hilltop, cheering as they came on.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TROOPERS ON THE TRAIL.

ONE of the most daring and dashing young officers of Fort Blanco led the troopers who had come in search of the party.

His name was Richard Turpin, but the soldiers called him Dashing Dick, and he was a fine officer, a hard fighter and good all-round fellow.

When he rode up to where the party was

he threw himself from the saddle, doffed his hat and said in a reproachful tone:

"I fear you have whipped off the enemy and given me no chance to become a rescuer."

"Blame the Senor Don Marlo Fuentes first as a rescuer, Lieutenant Turpin, and later Buckskin Sam; but you are in time to be of great service indeed, as these ladies are now in your care," said Colonel Sandos.

"A fortunate charge indeed for me; but do you know that I was fooled by an Indian?"

"How do you mean, Mr. Turpin?" asked Estelle.

"I would have been here at sunset, for your father grew anxious about you and sent me after you; but we met a red-skin, and he showed signs of peace, spoke English, after a fashion, and told us that he had seen a senor and two señoritas flying northward, pursued by braves of his band.

"He said that he loved the pale-faces and would lead us by a trail to head them off.

"I bit at the bait, followed the red devil for miles, and when night came he gave us the slip in the darkness, gave a war-whoop of derision and we knew him no more.

"I tried to recover lost ground and at once pushed on for the river, and a short while ago saw the flashes of your rifles and heard the war-cries of the Comanches."

"It was when Buckskin Sam came to the rescue," Delle De Silva said, and Colonel Sandos then remarked:

"Now, Lieutenant Turpin, as these young ladies were intrusted to my charge, I will transfer my responsibility to you.

"They have both proven most excellent soldiers under fire, and permit me to recommend that Don Marlo Fuentes is deserving of highest praise."

"I shall do so; but do you not return with us, Colonel Sandos?"

"No, senor, I must hasten on to the other side of the river."

"But you are wounded and need care, as does also Senor Don Marlo," urged Estelle.

"My own surgeon will care for me, señorita, and I must return."

"Not alone, for I can spare you some of my men."

"No thank you, lieutenant, I will go alone."

"If you will let your men lead my captured horses, Lieutenant Turpin, I will accompany the colonel, for it is my wish to scout around a little before returning to the fort, and kindly say to Colonel Elwood that I have a report to make to him when I come in," said Buckskin Sam.

"All right, Hall, I will, and I feel better to have you go with Colonel Sandos; but you, Don Marlo, will certainly return with us."

"Thank you, senor, I feel that I must do so, for my wound has been steadily bleeding and I begin to feel a trifle faint."

This was enough to stop all discussion, farewells were said to Colonel Sandos and Buckskin Sam, and the party mounted for a rapid ride to the fort, the Ranger calling out:

"Any change in poor Jack, lieutenant?"

"Yes, for the better, Powell told me as we left the fort."

"We will expect you back soon," and the party separated, Lieutenant Turpin riding by the side of Estelle, while the Ranchero King was Delle De Silva's escort.

And on toward the river rode Colonel Sandos, mounted upon one of the outlaws' horses, and Buckskin Sam, who remarked:

"A storm is threatening, colonel, and it would be well to go into the sheltered camp on this side of the river, waiting for daylight to cross, and I am a kind of half-way doctor, so can dress your wound fairly well, for I always go with the necessary articles for just such things."

"All right, Senor Sam, we will ride rapidly on and camp in the cavern, which I remember is there, while I will be glad to have you look at my wounded arm."

"Also, I wish to have a talk with you."

"And I with you, senor, for I have discovered that the outlaw captain was honest in warning you of an ambush, and intended only to save your life; but we must press on, sir, for the storm is rising rapidly," and they went on in a sweeping gallop along the trail to the ford.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAMP IN THE CAVERN.

"I TRUST the young ladies will not be caught in the storm, to add to their misfortunes," said Colonel Sandos, as he and Buckskin Sam dashed on toward the shelter of their intended camping-place.

"They will reach the fort, sir, before it breaks, I feel sure," was the answer, and fifteen minutes after they dashed off the trail, the Ranger leading, down into a vale where there was a spring, grass in plenty, and the shelter of heavy timber.

At the head of the little valley was a cliff, and in this was the cavern referred to.

The horses were quickly stripped of saddles and bridles and staked out, wood was gathered and a fire lighted in the entrance to the cavern just as a vivid flash of lightning came followed by a terrific crash of thunder, and the storm was upon them.

"I have some supper here, senor, and we might as well make ourselves comfortable, as soon as I have looked at your wound," said Buckskin Sam, when the two were seated in the cavern.

The fire gave ample light and the wound was dressed, after which supper was disposed of.

Then Colonel Sandos said:

"So you discovered that there were six men in ambush for me at the ford, Senor Hall?"

"I did, sir.

"But let me ask you if the Ranchero King told you of his meeting with me?"

"Not a word.

"He saw our trouble and came to our rescue, determined to lend a hand in the defense of the ladies, or suffer with us the result of defeat.

"I regard him more highly for that act, Senor Hall."

"Oh, yes, he has more grit than most men; but I suppose he had no time to talk about anything else save beating off the Indians."

"Oh yes, we talked of many things.

"So you met him then?"

Buckskin Sam explained just how he had met the Ranchero King and the quick and deadly punishment visited upon the three outlaws, who claimed to have mistaken him for Colonel Sandos.

The colonel listened most attentively and then said:

"That man Fuentes is a mystery to me, and a constantly increasing one.

"When Colonel Elwood and his daughter were captured by the Robber Rangers, he came to their rescue, right before them he shot the ringleaders dead, and he is the quickest man to take human life I have ever known.

"Then, you say, he rode away, and left you with the dead men?"

"He did, sir."

"But they were three only."

"True, senor, but three more came afterward, just as I was preparing to recross the river."

"And you dared try conclusions with them?"

"Oh, yes, but then you know I was in ambush, and that gave me all the advantage."

"Your modest way of putting it—but hear how it storms."

"Yes, sir, this is a fearful night, and I am glad we are in a secure place."

"As I am; but about those three men?"

"One I had to kill, and the other I captured, but, as I was about leaving to recross the river, I heard hoofs approaching, and who do you think it was?"

"Not the Ranchero King again—no, it could not be?"

"No, sir, it was the outlaw captain, Buck Parker."

"Ah! and you had his men at your mercy; but what of him?"

"As we are to work together in ridding the border of the Robber Rangers, Colonel Sandos, I will tell you frankly that he was accused by his men of treachery in informing you of your danger of an ambush."

"I am sorry for this."

"They suspected him, and one boldly accused him of being a traitor and threatened to inform on him."

"Fortunately for him the Ranchero King had silenced three of the six who denounced

him, I had stilled the tongue of another, and the two left were prisoners.

"Of course there was no quarrel between the man who had served us so well and myself, and we parted, I crossing the river with my prisoners, and coming to this camp.

"I expected you and waited supper until dark, and then gave the men theirs."

"It was their last meal on earth, for Parker had followed us across the river and shot them."

"Ah! to prevent betrayal.

"This looks as though he was indeed in earnest."

"It does, sir.

"At first I did not know who had fired the shot, and lay in cover for awhile, when I decided to go on and see what had detained you," and then Buckskin Sam showed the colonel the note left by the outlaw captain, and went on to explain how he had strapped the bodies on the horses and gone on the trail for the fort, hoping to meet him.

"And fortunate was it for us that you came, Senor Hall, for we owe you our lives, and never can I forget the debt of gratitude due you," and the colonel spoke earnestly, for the horrors of the scene came before him most vividly.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STOLEN RING.

THE storm still raged, the winds sounded mournfully through the trees in the little valley and whistled shrilly among the rocks of the cliff.

The horses had huddled for shelter under a spreading tree, and stood with drooped heads, while the storm roared in its fury, and the lightning and thunder-crashes came incessantly.

It was after midnight, but the two men in the cavern did not retire, for Buckskin Sam had more to tell.

The fire burned cheerfully, but could not blind the lightning's flashes.

At last Buckskin Sam said:

"Colonel Sandos, before I buried those outlaws I searched them and found considerable booty."

"Doubtless, for they carry their booty with them, fearing to bury it, as they do not know when they may have to fly the country for their lives."

"As the Ranchero King killed them, and said they were his cowboys, who recently belonged to the band of Robber Rangers, I of course decided to share spoils with him; but I found two things I decided to keep, hoping to find the owners, and as one is a Mexican name I wish to ask you if you have heard it."

"Certainly; what is the name, Senor Sam?"

"Juanita Corsala."

Buckskin Sam saw the start the colonel gave as he heard the name, and yet controlling any emotion that it might have recalled he said in an unmoved tone:

"Oh, yes, I know the Senorita Juanita Corsala well."

"She is a Mexican lady then, sir?"

"Yes, and a very beautiful one."

"Her home is a few hours' ride from my hacienda, and she dwells there with her mother and the peon servants, for the estate is quite a large one."

"Your friend Texas Jack knows her, for he went to see her on a mission for me, and which he fully accomplished."

"It struck me that I had heard the name of Corsala before, but I could not recall when and where."

"Perhaps I can enlighten you, Senor Hall."

"Captain Juan Corsala, the brother of the Senorita Corsala, was a captain in my Lancer regiment until a short while ago, when I killed him in a duel, fought on the cliff above us here and my second was our mutual friend, Texas Jack."

"That I had cause for killing Captain Corsala, other than a silly quarrel, as you know me you can understand, though, to give you proof of it, I will say that though at first the Senorita Corsala was revengeful, and, as we had once been very dear friends—nay I will say it, but for my meeting the Senorita Elwood before I had committed myself, she might have been my wife—she forgave me when she knew all, that her brother had fallen by my hand."

"It was to see her and tell her the truth that Texas Jack went to her home."

"So you have a ring bearing her name, have you?"

"Yes, sir, here it is."

Buckskin Sam handed out the beautiful ring he had taken from the dead outlaw, and at a glance the colonel recognized it and said:

"Yes, it is hers, even were the name not engraved in it."

"I know the ring well, and it was I who gave it to her, and often did she say that she prized it most highly."

"When her brother was killed she placed the ring upon his hand with a vow to avenge him, for then she did not know all the truth of why I had to act as I did."

"Her revenge took a strange turn, for she wished to strike me through another, Miss Elwood, and she even went to the fort to do so, but met her intended victim and confessed her sinful intention."

"I tell you this in confidence, Senor Sam."

"Certainly, colonel, and I so receive it."

"But how did the outlaw get possession of this ring?"

"You say that Corsala was buried with it on his hand, senor?"

"He was, for the Senorita Corsala informed me so herself."

"Then the body was dug from the grave, senor, and robbed."

"You are right, for that is the very way to account for the ring being in the possession of the outlaw."

"It appears so to me, senor."

Colonel Sandos was lost in silent meditation for a moment and then said:

"Senor Hall, you must go with me to my headquarters in the morning, and it is my hacienda also, for I have a great favor to ask of you."

"Now let us turn in and get a few hours' sleep, for the storm is blowing over."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RANGER'S MISSION.

THE storm cleared away in the night, the sun rising in a clear sky in the morning.

The singing of birds awakened the colonel and Buckskin Sam, and they found all nature bright and beautiful from the rain.

Their horses were cropping the freshened grass, and anxious to be upon their way the Ranger quickly cooked breakfast, after which they mounted and descended the steep trail to the ford.

Crossing the river the Ranger pointed out the stone-covered graves of the outlaws, and then the colonel set the pace for his home.

Buena Vista Ranch was quite a distance from the river, but beautifully located, and extended over a large space of country.

There were numerous cattle and horses upon it, quite a force of cowboys, and the hacienda was large enough to have quartered the colonel's regiment of Lancers.

But he had there his staff officers and bodyguard only, the regiment being stationed at different points within call.

The hacienda had been built for luxurious lives, and was furnished with all that heart could wish.

Buckskin Sam saw at a glance as he rode up to the hacienda, that the colonel was a perfect soldier, for his men were in neat uniforms, and they stood at a "present" as he passed them with the air of well-trained and disciplined cavalrymen.

After a lunch had been served them, the colonel said:

"Now, senor, I will have a fresh horse for you, and an escort, for it is not exactly safe for an American to ride unattended through Mexico, and then you can go to see the Senorita Juanita Corsala and deliver to her the ring, as you expressed a wish to do."

"I will, senor, but I prefer to go alone, for I believe you said that I speak Spanish perfectly, and I do not look unlike a Mexican."

"I have crossed often before into Mexico without a guard, and I do not think I will get into any trouble."

"As you please, senor, and I can readily direct you to the Corsala Hacienda."

"As you approach it on the right of the trail, you will see a clump of timber, and it is there that the private burying-ground of the Corsala is, and if you went there you

might discover if the grave has been opened, though if so, and it must have been for you to have that ring, it is astonishing that the Senorita Corsala did not discover the fact."

"I am ready to start whenever you think best, Colonel Sandos."

"Then I will order your horse for you at once, and then direct you just how to reach the ranch."

The horse was soon brought up by a peon of the hacienda, a fine animal from the colonel's own stable, and having received his full instructions, Buckskin Sam mounted and rode away upon his mission.

"Well, this is a trail with a vengeance, for I'm going to see a beautiful woman, and it gives me a chance to see what there is in the lawlessness that curses this river border."

"Jack, however, went on the same trail, and at night, while his mission was a harder one to accomplish, so I certainly should not fail."

When at last the white walls of the hacienda came in sight, Buckskin Sam saw a clump of trees on the right of the trail, and at once turned off in that direction.

As he approached he saw the glimmer of a white cross through the foliage, and said:

"Yes, that is the burying-ground."

He rode into the timber, dismounted at the little inclosure, and his first glance showed him that the newest made grave there had been opened and hastily filled in again.

He glanced at the several stones with their inscriptions, and then rode on to the Hacienda Corsala.

As he dismounted, a peon took his horse, and he was led to a piazza that was half hidden with flowering vines.

Rising from an easy-chair, Juanita Corsala greeted her visitor with a dignified yet cordial manner, and, bidding him be seated, ordered refreshments brought, a cup of chocolate and vanilla cakes.

"Now, Senor Hall, you told the servant that you wished to see me upon a matter of importance and personal interest."

"We are alone," she said, turning her lovely eyes full upon the face of the Texan, and who could not but admit to himself that he had never seen a more beautiful woman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STORY TOLD.

URGED by the Senorita Corsala to make known the motive of his visit, Buckskin Sam said:

"I fear, senorita, that I must cause you pain, by bringing up unhappy memories, yet I have come to do what I consider my duty."

"Do not fear, senor, to hurt me, for I am accustomed to hard blows, and I have learned to take life and all there is in it as it comes to me."

"Plucky," muttered the Ranger admiringly, while he answered:

"I am an American, as I said to you, a Texan and a Ranger."

"I am at present serving as a scout, and in an affair at the Whirlpool Ford of the Rio Grande, with outlaws known as Robber Rangers, I found upon the body of one of the slain a ring bearing your name."

The senorita started, her face flushed, then paled, and she asked in a tone that had a tremor in it:

"A ring bearing my name, senor?"

"Yes, senorita, and I told Colonel Sandos of the circumstance, and he recognized the ring, told me of you, and suggested that I bring it to you, making known the circumstances under which it came into my possession."

"It was kind of Colonel Sandos, senor, and I thank him and you."

"As he recognized the ring it must be mine, for we were very good friends, in fact still are the best of friends; but I cannot understand what ring it can be, as I have lost none that I am aware of."

"You buried your brother with a ring upon his hand?"

Again she started and her face paled, but she did not speak, and Buckskin Sam, reaching out the ring, asked:

"Is this the ring, senorita?"

"Heavenly Mother! When or where did you get this ring?"

"I have told you, senorita."

"From the body of an outlaw?"

"Yes, senorita."

"And where did he get it?"

"The colonel said that it could be gotten in but one way, by robbing the grave of your brother."

"It must have been done."

"It was, for as I came along the trail I went by the way of your family burying-ground, and the grave shows that it had been opened and refilled."

She sprung to her feet and paced up and down the piazza for a moment, and then said:

"Senor, I was devoted to my brother, and he was the idol of my life."

"He was killed and I cursed the hand that took his life and vowed revenge."

"Then it came to me that my brother had cruelly deceived me in many ways, and he had plotted the ruin of Colonel Sandos."

"Remember, I am speaking of my brother, not to a Mexican, but to you, an American."

"My eyes were opened and I saw that Colonel Sandos had been more than merciful, he had done all that man could do with honor, and my brother drove him to act as he did."

"From the day that this truth dawned upon me I have not had the heart to visit his grave, when before I went there by day and night."

"I was waiting to have time soften the feeling I could not but have against my poor, unfortunate, sinning brother, when I could go again to his grave with nothing like bitterness in my heart."

"And since I was there ghouls have defiled it, have robbed the dead."

"How strange it is that this ring should have come into your hands and thus back to mine, and this is proof that the vow of vengeance I made was wrong, should never have been uttered."

"And you avenged the sacrilege to the dead, senor, and God bless you for it."

"Pardon me, senorita, but I do not wish to appear under false colors, so let me tell you that I did not kill the man."

"Who did then?"

"I will tell you how it was, senorita," and Buckskin Sam told the story of the affair at the river, and how the Ranchero King recognized in the outlaws men of his own ranch, and most summarily put them to death.

"Senor Hall?" quickly said the Mexican girl, her face lighting up brightly as some thought flashed through it.

"Yes, senorita."

"Will you do me a favor, senor?"

"If in my power, senorita."

"I wish to go to the Del Monte Hacienda, when I have seen just how far the ghouls went in their sacrilege of my brother's grave."

"I wish to go then and see the Ranchero King and have him find out just who the men were who did the deed, for one alone did not do it."

"Perhaps those who were with him when he was killed were the guilty ones, senorita."

"That I must know, and will, for all who were guilty must suffer," was the determined response.

Buckskin Sam was silent for a moment and then said, as he thought that the chance to go to the ranch of the Ranchero King might result in discoveries useful to him:

"I will accompany you, senorita, as you ask it."

"When will you go?"

"To-morrow morning we will start at dawn, and I will have two men from the ranch accompany us."

Buckskin Sam did not wish to remain as a guest at the Corsala Hacienda, but there was no help for it and so he yielded to the desire of the senorita that he should do so.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RANCHERO KING.

HAVING been under a terrible nervous strain, and fatigued by their long ride and exertions, both Estelle Elwood and Delle De Silva were anxious to get to the fort as quickly as possible and urged Lieutenant Turpin not to spare the horses.

Then too they felt anxious for the Ranchero King, who they could see was suffering from his wound.

They had not ridden far when the storm-clouds rolled up above the horizon, and then it became a race with the tempest, for the officer and his men felt that it would be a severe one.

They dashed into the fort twenty minutes before it broke, and found all there in a state of great alarm at their absence and Lieutenant Turpin's delayed return.

The Ranchero King was at once placed in the hands of Surgeon Powell, who dressed his wound most carefully, checking the flow of blood, and then he sunk to sleep and would awake refreshed and much better, the doctor said.

Colonel Elwood was deeply moved at the story told him and the danger his daughter and Miss De Silva had been in.

Of course there was no one to blame, but scouts were sent out in spite of the storm, to see just what force the Indians had, and what their next move would be, while a couple of troops of cavalry were held in readiness to immediately take the trail.

"We must do all in our power for Don Marlo, my daughter, for it was a noble thing in him to dash in to your rescue to share your fate with you."

"I only wish there was not such a cloud upon his life, for I really begin to like him very much."

"Yes, sir, it was noble of him; but he is very ready to kill, and fires upon an Indian as he might at a target."

"It seems well that he did do so."

"True, sir; but with Colonel Sandos and Buckskin Sam it was different, for they seem to fire to kill with real regret at the necessity.

"Still, neither Delle or I have any fault to find with Don Marlo, and I do hope that he will not be found to be severely wounded in the morning."

"I trust not; but you owe your lives to Buckskin Sam after all?"

"Yes, father, he rode in upon the Indians in a way that made them think, and we thought the same, that there was a band of Rangers upon them."

"And Hall accompanied the colonel?"

"Yes, sir, but asked me to say to you that he would soon return and that he had some information to communicate to you, sir."

"I shall be glad to learn it, and it is doubtless something of importance that he has discovered, for he is certainly most thoroughly taking Texas Jack's place, for he is a remarkable man, Estelle."

"He is, indeed, father, and I am glad that he went with Colonel Sandos, he will be such a protection to him."

The colonel laughed and replied:

"Sandos is pretty well able to take care of himself, my child; but Sam Hall will make the best of his going, I am sure, and the wounding of Texas Jack has made him determined to put down this band of Robber Rangers."

"Why, I supposed we had struck them a deadly blow, and given the Indians a lesson they would long remember, and here only a short while after you are nearly taken prisoner by them, and Colonel Sandos is selected as one whom the outlaws are determined to put out of the way."

"Yes, I am indeed glad that Buckskin Sam has taken the matter in hand, and I will lend him all the aid in my power."

"I only wish that Texas Jack was able to aid Hall, but poor fellow, it will be weeks before he is again in the saddle, Surgeon Powell informs me."

"I am glad that it is no worse, father," was Estelle's answer, and she soon after retired to her room glad indeed to seek rest, and congratulating herself that she was not exposed to the fury of the storm that was raging.

Don Marlo Fuentes awoke much refreshed in the morning, and though weak from loss of blood, he insisted upon rising, and accepted Colonel Elwood's invitation to dine with him, and also met Miss De Silva and her uncle, Major Gayle Gorman and his wife.

Though pale, the Ranchero King did not appear otherwise to show that he had suffered, and all found him a fine talker, intelligent, witty, a man who knew the world, and who cast the shadow of his life from him when he sought to please.

In spite of the request of Colonel Elwood and others that he would not leave the fort

but remain a few days, he said that he must start on his return to his ranch that afternoon, and mounting his horse, declining an escort, rode away from the fort, an hour before sunset.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SERGEANT'S SECRET.

THE Ranchero King rode along on the trail homeward at a quiet pace, as though in no humor to ride rapidly.

There was a strange expression upon his handsome face, one hard to fathom.

He carried his left arm in a sling, as Surgeon Powell had suggested that he should do for a few days, and his face was pale from loss of blood, but the wound did not appear to pain or inconvenience him in any great degree.

A few miles from the fort he went over a rise and half drew rein as he saw a horseman in a clump of timber a short distance ahead of him.

He continued on, however, when he discovered that the horseman was a soldier.

The man was seated erect in his saddle, as though on sentinel duty, and the Ranchero King supposed he was an outpost of whom Colonel Elwood had not spoken.

As he neared the half dozen scrub trees that but partially sheltered the cavalryman the Ranchero King saw that he wore the rank of a sergeant upon his sleeve, was a large man with clean shaven face and an eye peculiarly bright and piercing.

"Halt!" suddenly called out the sergeant as the Ranchero King came within a few yards of him.

Obeying the command the Ranchero King said calmly:

"Well, my man, do you not know me?"

"I do, señor."

"Colonel Elwood said nothing to me about a guard being on the trail."

"No, señor."

"Is it usual in the American army to place a sergeant as a sentinel?"

"When that sergeant has a duty to perform."

"Well, as I have nothing to do with your duty I will ride on."

"No, señor, you will hear what I have to say."

"You are impudent, sir, and I will report to Colonel Elwood your insolence."

"This is not an affair in which Colonel Elwood is interested, for it is between you and me, Señor Don Marlo Fuentes."

"How! What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I knew that you were to start for your home I gained leave for a few hours and came here to head you off."

"May I ask your purpose, sergeant?" and the Ranchero King spoke very calmly.

"Yes; to make certain demands of you."

"Ah! A soldier of the United States upon his own soil, holding up a Mexican gentleman."

"Mexican gentleman—you?" sneered the sergeant.

"What! do you dare insult me?" and the Don dropped his hand upon the hilt of his revolver.

"Hold on, Don Marlo Fuentes, for you are talking to a man who is your match now, not one to be shot down mercilessly by you," and the sergeant had covered the Ranchero King with a derringer before he could draw the revolver he had placed his hand upon.

Don Marlo laughed and replied, as he raised his hand:

"My dear fellow, the only excuse that I can offer for you is that you are demented, and I never quarrel with a fool or a dying man, so I will ride on."

"Not until you hear what I have to say."

"What is it, then?"

"You are Don Marlo Fuentes?"

"I have that name."

"You are known as the Ranchero King?"

"Yes, men so call me."

"What else?"

"Do you mean what other name am I known by?"

"Yes."

"The Duelist Avenger."

"And what else?"

"Nothing that I recall."

"I mean recently."

"I bear no recent name."

The sergeant laughed and replied:

"I happen to know that you do."

"Well, what is it, for I am tiring of this?"

"In spite of being tired you must hear me."

"Be quick."

"You are—"

The sergeant paused, rode nearer, still keeping the Ranchero King covered, and then in a low whisper uttered a few words.

The Ranchero King never changed color and replied:

"You are playing a bold game of blackmail, my man, one that will not win with me."

"You wish to extort gold from me by making the accusation that you do."

"I hold a secret that is fatal to you, Don Marlo Fuentes, and I am here to make terms with you," was the low response of the sergeant.

CHAPTER XXX.

A FATAL ERROR.

"So you hold a secret which you say is fatal to me, sergeant?" asked the Ranchero King in the calmest manner possible.

"It is, if I betray you."

The Ranchero King appeared not in the least disturbed.

He did not seem anxious to continue on his way, but to remain and talk, for he threw one foot over the saddle-horn, lighted a *cigarrito*, and said:

"Well, sergeant, let us talk the matter over."

"It is for me to demand, you to acquiesce."

"All right, go about it your own way."

"What do you wish?"

"A sergeant's pay is very small."

"That means that you want money?"

"Exactly."

"How much?"

"I want money enough to keep me in good circumstances."

"What do you consider good circumstances?"

"Well, my term of service expires in a couple of months, I have a few hundreds coming to me, and with that I wish to take a vacation and enjoy myself."

"But I desire to buy a small ranch, cattle and horses and be able to live like a gentleman, and so I will say ten thousand dollars!"

"Ten thousand?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me what you want it for?"

"I told you, to make me comfortable."

"I see; but you didn't just say why you came to me for it."

"I hold a secret fatal to you."

"Ah yes, so you said."

"And I expect you to grant my demand."

"That is, pay you the gold asked for?"

"Yes."

"Now why do you accuse me of being the one you know this secret about?"

"Because I know you."

"How so?"

"I lived in Mexico a few years, Don Marlo, before I entered the United States Army."

"Well, what has that to do with me?"

"I knew you there then, though you pretend not to remember me, and I know you as you are now."

"Pardon me, but where did we meet then?"

"At your ranch."

"I still fail to place you."

"I was for a year at Del Monte Hacienda."

"Under what name?"

"Nicholas Norton."

"Ah! now I place you perfectly, my dear Nicholas Norton."

"Then you wore a mustache and long hair, but now your hair is cut close, you are as clean shaven as a priest."

"I remember you perfectly now, Nicholas, and how I kept you from being killed one night in the city of Mexico, carried you home with me, and finding you a clever young fellow, writing a good hand, made you my accountant."

"I treated you well, did all in my power for you, liked you, and trusted you."

"You did."

"And one morning I woke up the wiser, for when I returned to my home after a two

weeks' absence in the city of Mexico, I discovered that you had gone."

"Yes, I received a letter from home and decided to return to the United States, so I wrote you of my going, thanked you for all you had done for me and left."

"That I know, and I soon discovered that you had robbed me of a large sum in gold, had taken some of my jewels, for you had access to all my valuables, fitted yourself out thoroughly and departed."

"So we meet again, do we, Señor Nicholas Norton?"

"We do, and I heard long afterward, that you had accused me of robbing you, that you had blackened my name, and for it I now demand payment, the ten thousand you must pay me."

"What has become of what you robbed me of?"

"I did not rob you."

"The gold and jewels disappeared with you."

"It is false!"

"See here, Nicholas Norton, lying is not one of my vices, and I tell you that the gold and jewels were missing upon my return and you are the thief."

"And I say that you lie, for I never took one dollar not my own, and I left my accounts square and the letter explaining it all."

"You accused me, and it is because I know your secret that I demand payment of you, and I will have it."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then I shall expose you to Colonel Elwood."

"I am guilty of no wrong, your charge is false, but I am not the man to let you cast dishonor upon me."

"You are a highwayman and hence must take the consequences of your act in holding me up, a fatal mistake on your part," and there was a quick movement of the hand of the Ranchero King, a sharp report and the sergeant uttered a cry as a bullet tore into his side and he fell backward out of his saddle.

In spite of the derringer held in his hand he had been caught off his guard.

The Ranchero King looked down at him a moment, then took out his note-book, wrote a few lines, fastened them to the horn of the saddle on the sergeant's horse and started him at a gallop on the trail to the fort.

Then he coolly rode on his way as before on the trail to the river, leaving the sergeant lying where he had fallen.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MAN IN BUCKSKIN.

THE Ranchero King had hardly disappeared over the nearest rise to where the sergeant had fallen, when a horseman came in sight following a trail that turned into the one leading to the fort.

He was mounted upon a wiry-looking horse that went along at a swinging dog-trot, and he was dressed in a buckskin suit, wore moccasins and a slouch hat.

He was well armed and equipped, and half halted as he saw the horse of the sergeant skurrying along on the trail to the fort.

Then his eyes fell upon the prostrate form lying upon the ground in the edge of the timber, and in an instant he was upon the alert.

Riding forward, his rifle unslung from his saddle and swung around ready for use, he rode rapidly up to the sergeant, drew rein and dismounted.

"Ah! a soldier, yes, a sergeant."

"Can he have been thrown from his horse?"

He bent over over the form, turned it over, and a cry broke from his lips as he beheld the face.

Instantly he dropped upon his knees by the side of the soldier and cried:

"God in heaven! it cannot be that he is dead!"

"Dead, just as I have found him?"

"No, no, it cannot be!"

The voice it was that was heard by the ears almost deaf to the sound, and the eyes slowly opened, and a groan came from the set lips.

Into the face of the one who bent over him the eyes gazed, and a start ran through the form.

Then the eyes were closed.

But only for an instant as the man in buckskin cried:

"Thank God he is yet alive."

"Nick, speak to me!"

"Do you know me, Nick?"

Again the eyes opened slowly and looked upon the face bending over him.

There was a smile, and then the lips parted with the low spoken words:

"Yes, I know you."

"Could I forget you?"

"Great God! how is it that I have found you thus, for I have been looking for you for years, Nick."

"I have tracked this country over, have been into Mexico on the search for you and at last have found you to see you thus."

"Who has done this, Nick, for as truly as there is a Heaven above I will track him as I have tracked you, and I will avenge you."

Again the smile came faintly upon the lips and then the sergeant said with an effort:

"Water."

The canteen of water was taken from the saddle-horn, then from a flask was poured into a tin cup a drink of brandy and the soldier eagerly drank it down.

It revived him, and he appeared so much stronger in a short while that the man in buckskin cried eagerly:

"You are much better, Nick."

"Your wound is not fatal after all, and you will live."

But the sergeant shook his head and replied firmly:

"No, the wound is fatal."

"It is not so, and you must brighten up, for the fort cannot be far from here and I will go there for help."

"No, you must not leave me."

"The wound is fatal, I feel it, I know it, and I am rapidly slipping out of life."

"You must hear me, for it seems that Heaven must have sent you to me in this my last moment of life."

The man in buckskin was very pale, his lip quivered, and he seemed deeply moved.

But he appeared to realize that the sergeant spoke the truth, that he was dying, and he said softly:

"Alas, Nick! I too feel that you tell the truth, that you are slipping away from me in the moment of my triumph."

"I have much to tell you, to cheer you, to brighten your last of life, but I must talk quickly, for there is much that you must tell me, for have I not vowed to avenge you?"

"I will talk now, for I can guess what you would say, and I will tell you what you would know, I will leave you a legacy of hatred."

And in a low, but earnest tone the dying sergeant talked for ten minutes or more, and the man in buckskin listened to each word that fell from his lips.

Then he too began to talk, but ere he had said much he felt the grasp on his hand slacken and he knew that life had gone out like the flame of a candle.

The sergeant was dead.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TO THE HACIENDA DEL MONTE.

THERE was no denying it, the grave of Captain Juan Corsala had been robbed by ghouls.

That Senorita Corsala had not made the discovery lay in the fact that she had not visited the grave since she had become convinced that her brother had wronged, beyond all forgiveness, Colonel Sandos.

She had not had the heart to go there until she could forgive her brother, when time had healed the wound, for the cruel wrongs he had put upon the man she loved.

But when Juanita Corsala had gone to her brother's grave with Buckskin Sam, there was the proof that it had been opened.

And more, it was found that the jeweled sword and epaulettes, buried with the dead soldier, and the ring his sister had placed upon his hand, were gone.

It was a bitter blow to Juanita Corsala, and all the old love for her brother came

back to her, and she wept as she recalled him to her mind only as she had known him, not as he was in secret life.

The body was reburied, and the next morning at an early hour, after breakfast, Juanita and Buckskin Sam, with three of the ranch cowboys in attendance, rode away from the hacienda on the trail to the home of the Ranchero King, while a fourth man had been dispatched to the headquarters of Colonel Sandos with a letter from the Ranger, informing him that the grave of Captain Corsala had been robbed beyond all question, and that he was going to escort Senorita Juanita to the home of Don Marlo Fuentes to try and discover if other of his cowboys could be proven guilty of having aided in the outrage.

This would also explain to the colonel why Buckskin Sam had not returned by the hacienda as he had expected to do.

The senorita was splendidly mounted, and she was an untiring horsewoman.

She had seen to it that there was a pack-horse taken along with ample supplies and camp-equipage, in case they should have to spend the night on the trail from any unforeseen circumstances.

She set the pace herself, at which they turned to work, and Buckskin Sam was satisfied, for he knew that she understood well just what horseflesh could endure.

At noon a halt was made for an hour and dinner was prepared by one of the cowboys, and having buried her grief the senorita ate heartily, and seemed most anxious that Buckskin Sam should do the same.

She would not make the time an unpleasant one by dwelling upon her sorrows, but talked well on many subjects, and the Ranger found her a most entertaining companion.

She talked of his home, Texas, of his people, then of army life upon the border, and seemed deeply interested when the Ranger told her of the narrow escape of Colonel Sandos and his fair escort, the pluck of the Ranchero King in going to their rescue, and how the cavalry had at last rescued them. He hardly more than referred to his own part in the affair, for Buckskin Sam was always modest regarding his own gallant deeds.

One of the *vaqueros* from the Corsala Ranch knew the way to the Hacienda Del Monte, and in the afternoon pointed out to the senorita the white adobe walls of the house of the Ranchero King far up in the mountains.

The trail leading to it was a perilous one, as it wound along the edge of cliffs, and here and there crossed narrow, swaying bridges, that were dangerous to go over to one whose nerve was not a strong one.

Time and again Buckskin Sam feared for his fair companion, but she showed no sign of womanly weakness, and never flinched at the dangers they passed over, not even when once her horse slipped and, but for the quick grasp of his rein by the Ranger's ever ready hand, he would have fallen and hurled himself and his beautiful rider to death on the rocks before.

The last part of the trail was a steep climb, but all was passed in safety, and the party rode into the plaza of the grand old hacienda not long after the Ranchero King's arrival from Fort Blanco.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RANCHERO KING AT HOME.

The Ranchero King was most cautious in his reception of his visitors, and bowing low to Senorita Corsala, said in his dignified way:

"This is an honor that I appreciate, Senorita, your presence in Del Monte Hacienda."

"I am glad that I returned home from the fort, so that you had not your long ride for nothing."

"I have come, Don Marlo, upon a special mission, and one which I will quickly explain.

"You were mistaken, I believe, for Colonel Sandos by some of your own *vaqueros*, and who turned out also to be members of the Robber Ranger band of outlaws."

"You are right. Senorita Corsala, my own men have recently most frequently been proven guilty of secretly belonging to the band of Robber Rangers, in fact the tares have been hard to separate from the wheat,

though I am doing all in my power to weed them out."

"May I ask if the affair at the river the other day held any particular interest for you?"

"It did, in that the Senor Hall here found on the body of one of the outlaws, your *vaqueros*, you know, this ring."

"It is a ring that has a history I need not now speak of, and which you will observe bears my name engraved in it."

The Ranchero King took the ring, examined it with interest, and said:

"It is a beautiful ring, senorita; but may I ask how it came into the possession of an outlaw, as there has been no robbery of your home that I have heard of?"

"Not of my home, senor, but far worse, for the grave of my brother was robbed."

"You knew my brother, you saw him fall by the hand of Colonel Sandos."

"This ring I placed upon his hand when he lay dead in the hacienda, and he was buried with it."

"And more, he was buried in the uniform of his regiment, with his jewel-studded epaulettes, and his gold-hilted sword, in which were also some precious stones."

"They were all taken, senor, along with this ring, and let me assure you that their intrinsic value has no claim upon me, only the knowledge that they were taken from my brother's grave."

"What their value may be I am willing to pay in gold to recover them, and I will double that sum to have the perpetrators of the outrage punished, if your ready hand has not already done so in killing those who were with the man from whom Senor Hall took this ring."

The Ranchero King listened with deepest attention until Juanita Corsala had ceased speaking, and then he said thoughtfully:

"I cannot believe that the guilty ones were all punished, senorita, as no other booty was found upon the other bodies."

"The sword and epaulettes would have also been carried by the robber, the hilt being taken from the blade to carry it the more readily."

"I shall send special men on the search through my ranch here, and if the articles are found, whoever has them in their possession I pledge you will never stand trial for this heinous crime."

"I have a lawless element to contend with, do not know the good from the bad, but when I do find out the guilty ones, I am self-constituted master of life, and they suffer as I deem best."

"Pardon me one minute, please."

He arose and left the room, but only for a short while, and returning with the same severe face said:

"I have sent men on the search, senorita, and while awaiting their return you and the Senor Hall will dine with me."

In the hospitable manner in which the invitation was offered, it was accepted, and both Juanita Corsala and Buckskin Sam were surprised at the elegant manner in which the Ranchero King lived.

Though his house was as strong as a fort, and as large, it was yet luxuriously furnished, peons in neat attire were ready to obey the slightest bidding, and the meal was a perfect feast, the table being weighted down with the solid silver service, while the wines were of the finest quality.

The room to which Juanita was shown was a beautiful one, and she wondered at such a home with no refinement of a woman's presence about it.

The Don was a sufferer from his wound, that was evident, but he did the honors with courtly grace, and did not allow his fatigue and pain to be a barrier to his hospitality.

"Of course, senorita, you and the Senor Hall will remain beneath my roof tonight," said the Don, as they left the dining-room.

"No, thank you, senor, it will be moonlight and I shall return to my home, for I have an escort of three *vaqueros* from my ranch, after Senor Hall leaves me, as he will do at the trail leading to the fort—but there come some horsemen at a gallop, and—"

"And they have two men prisoners, I see—the guilty ones have been found," was the quiet reply of the Ranchero King.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
THE STORY OF GUILT.

The horsemen were seen approaching the hacienda at a rapid gallop.

They were seven in number, two of them being prisoners, as they were bound to their horses.

The broad piazza to which the Ranchero King had led his guests, overlooked the slope and a valley breaking away below the hacienda.

The men on horseback entered the adobe walls, crossed the plaza and halted in front of the piazza.

They were a dashing-looking lot of Mexican cowboys, though two of their number sat on their horses with bowed head.

"Well, Tonio, you made quick work of your search, it seems," said the Ranchero King, addressing the one who appeared to be the leader of the party.

"Yes, senor, I had an idea, from what you told me, who to look for, as three of the men asked for leave a couple of weeks ago and went into the interior for several days.

"They returned in a very excited manner, but kept quiet about their trip.

"One of the men, you told me, had been killed by you, having intended to ambush you for Colonel Sandos, of the Lancers.

"The other two men are here, Don Marlo?"

"And what proof have you that these two men are guilty, Tonio?"

"The best of proof, senor; I found the sword and the epaulettes hidden in their cabin."

"Ah! fatal proof that," and turning to the two men who sat with bowed heads in their saddles, their faces pallid, their forms trembling, the Ranchero King said sternly:

"Let them dismount and stand before me, Tonio."

The men were freed of their bonds that held them to the saddle and placed before their stern judge, while Tonio handed over to him the sword and epaulettes.

"Where did you get this sword and these epaulettes, men?" asked the Ranchero King, fixing his eyes upon them.

"Sanchez gave them to us, senor," said one.

"Sanchez, eh?"

"Yes, senor."

"And he is dead?"

"It is so reported, senor."

"Well, Sanchez was the one who had the ring in his possession, senorita."

The men started at this and glanced at each other, then at Senorita Corsala and Buckskin Sam.

"Tonio?"

"Yes, senor."

"Were these two of the three men you gave leave to, that they might ride into the interior?"

"They were, senor."

"Who was the third man?"

"Sanchez, senor."

"How long were they gone?"

"Three nights, senor."

"Well, men, matters look dark for you, for you three went from here to the Corsala Hacienda."

"You hung about there until you had arranged your plans to rob the grave of Captain Corsala."

"Ah, senor!"

"You know that I am telling the truth, and I will tell you more."

"You robbed the body of this sword and jeweled belt buckle, these epaulettes studded with gems, and this ring that I hold here in my fingers."

"Sanchez got the ring, and you two took the lion's share, the sword, buckle and epaulettes."

"Now, why did you rob the grave of Captain Corsala?"

"Senor, I will confess all and we throw ourselves upon your mercy."

"We did rob the grave of Captain Corsala, but not so much for hope of gain as for revenge."

"What motive had you for revenge against the Senor Captain Corsala?"

"We were once soldiers, senor, and belonged to the command of Captain Corsala."

"That lady is his sister we know, but I must speak, she must hear how he treated us, for we were as dogs under the lash of a keeper."

"He had no mercy for any man, and time and again has he struck us, yes, with this same jeweled sword."

"When we had served our term out, we began herding and soon after entered your employ as *vaqueros*, senor."

"But we were glad when we heard that Colonel Sandos, a noble man, generous, brave and a gentleman always to the meanest man under his command, had killed Captain Corsala."

"Then a comrade came to us and said that the captain we hated had been buried in full uniform, with jeweled sword and epaulettes, and then we decided to rob his grave."

"That, senor is the story, and we are sorry that his sister must hear the truth, for all speak kindly of her, while none bless the memory of her brother."

CHAPTER XXXV.

RETRIBUTION.

THE story of the outlaw was listened to with the most intense interest by Senorita Corsala, while the Ranchero King heard what was said with the sinister smile that was so provoking to any one who wished to read his thoughts.

Buckskin Sam listened attentively, his eyes first upon one face, then upon another of the two men, and when the outlaw concluded he gave an appealing look toward Senorita Corsala, as though begging her to plead for him.

"You have heard what the man has said, senorita?"

"Yes, Don Marlo."

"I think he tells the truth, for he has the articles taken as proof of his guilt."

"Yes, senor."

"I am again deeply mortified to feel that this man, and his two comrades were members of my *vaquero* band."

"You have explained, Don Marlo, where you employ so many that evil ones will often be engaged unknowingly."

"True, but I wish these men to feel that I am not one to be imposed upon thus."

"They must know that when I engage a man upon my ranch I do not intend that he shall be a disreputable character, and, under the guise of honorable employment, be secretly a member of the Robber Rangers band."

"This the men must know, Senorita Corsala, and there is but one way to show them that I will not tolerate lawlessness, and that is by making examples of those whom I catch in their villainy."

"Have you anything to ask the prisoners, senorita?"

"Nothing, senor."

"Tonio, take these two men to the *vaquero* camps, call the men together and just at sunset string them up with lariats."

"The men must know the crime they have been guilty of and that they are hanged by my order."

"Yes, senor," said Tonio, with no show of sympathy for the fate of the two men whom he had to hang.

Buckskin Sam glanced at the chief, and saw that he was in earnest, that he was proving his claim that he was master of the lives of his people, if so he chose to take the law in his own hands.

"Do you mean, senor, to carry out your threat, and have these men hanged without trial?" asked Juanita.

"I certainly do, senorita."

"They are at least entitled to a trial by law."

"Why so, and is not my word law here, for this is my domain for miles and miles around, these mountains are mine, and those who earn their living here must be subject to my laws."

"These men have been proven guilty, their plunder was found in their possession, and there is no need for more to be said, for they have been sentenced and must die."

The men looked appealingly toward Juanita Corsala, and one murmured:

"We wronged you cruelly, senorita, we robbed the grave of one you loved, no matter what he was to you in the past, and yet we beg you to plead for us."

"I do, I will."

"Senor Don Marlo, these men wronged me, and my dead."

"I have all that they robbed the grave of,

they have had a lesson, and I beg you to spare them."

"Thank you, oh, thank you, senorita!" cried the men together, while Buckskin Sam said:

"And I, too, senor, beg that their lives may be spared, and some other punishment than death put upon them."

"Thank you, too, senor," the doomed men said earnestly.

Every eye was now upon the Ranchero King, but he was stern and unmoved, while he said:

"Senorita, and you, Senor Hall, I am sorry not to be able to grant your wishes in this matter, but I never forgive or forget a wrong."

"I never retract a sentence unless proof of innocence is found at the last moment."

"I have doomed these two men to death, and no power on earth can save them."

"Mercy, senor, mercy!" cried the men, but the Ranchero King paid no heed to them and Juanita said:

"Do you swear that it is wholly useless then for me to plead, senor?"

"Wholly useless, Senorita Corsala."

"Senor Hall, I am ready to return if you are," coldly said the Mexican girl.

"I regret you will not remain over night; but if you will go, senorita, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you accomplished the purpose of your errand, and though moved by sympathy for a moment, you will later be glad that I did not yield, but had the despoilers of your brother's grave punished as they should be."

Juanita Corsala made no reply, but turned toward the two men and said in a tone of sympathy:

"I am sorry for you, senors, and may Heaven have mercy upon you."

Ten minutes after she was riding away from the hacienda with Buckskin Sam by her side; but neither uttered a word, their thoughts being busy with the strange man they had just left.

"Here I leave you, senorita," said Buckskin Sam, but as the words were spoken a lariat settled over his shoulders, and he was dragged backward from his saddle, while at the same time Senorita Corsala was also caught in the toils.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE RANCHERO KING'S LETTER.

THE sergeant's loose horse ran along at a good gait until he came to a plot of grass and then he stopped and refreshed himself for awhile.

But as he wanted water, and the nearest that he could get was at the fort, he pushed on again once more and when caught by the sentinel at the gate the note was discovered fastened to the saddle-horn.

Lieutenant Dick Turpin happened to be officer of the day, and when he was called by the corporal the note was handed to him.

"It is Sergeant Nick Norton's horse, sir," said the sergeant of the guard.

"Yes, and the note is addressed to Colonel Elwood."

"I will take it to him," answered the lieutenant, and he at once hastened to headquarters.

The young officer was a favorite with the colonel, and he had a still more tender spot for him since his rescue of the party the night before.

The colonel also knew the young lieutenant's secret, that he devotedly loved Estelle, but knew how hopeless his regard was, so concealed his sorrow as well as he could.

"Ah, Turpin, a letter for me, and where is the carrier from?"

"The letter was found fastened to the saddle of Sergeant Nick Norton's horse, sir, the animal coming riderless to the fort."

The colonel hastily took the note, which bore his name, written in a bold hand with a lead pencil.

Opening it he read aloud as follows:

"MY DEAR SENOR COLONEL:—

"It is with sincere regret that I have to report to you an unfortunate affair, as I had to take the life of one of your soldiers, a sergeant."

"He halted me on the trail a while since, demanding gold of me, and with his pistol covering my heart."

"I argued the matter with him until I could catch him off his guard, which I did, so killed him."

"You will find his body in a clump of trees some three miles from the fort, and I send this by his horse, as I do not feel able to return to the fort and thus add to my long day's ride."

"I will make a personal statement of the affair when I again visit the fort, or should you require my presence, please send a courier after me to my mountain ranch and I will come at once to see you."

"With regret that it was an American soldier whose life I was forced to take, I remain

With respect,

"Yours to command,

"MARLO FUENTES,
"of Hacienda Del Monte."

"Mr. Turpin, this is a very serious affair," said Colonel Elwood, when he read the note of the Ranchero King aloud.

"It appears to be, sir, for of all men that Sergeant Norton should be thus accused it surprises me," answered Lieutenant Dick Turpin.

"We must discuss this matter most seriously," the colonel continued, and he at once sent his orderly for Major Gayle Gorman, Captain Bemis, the adjutant of the post, and Surgeon Frank Powell, the latter an officer whom Colonel Elwood always consulted upon matters of importance as he had a cool head, was a thorough plainsman, and had won fame as a scout and Indian-fighter.

The officers sent for at once put in an appearance at headquarters, and the colonel placed before them the letter of the Ranchero King.

All were surprised and did not know just what to say in regard to the matter, for Sergeant Nick Norton was a universally popular man and was known to be one who had been reared well, and above the rank he held.

Not a word of complaint had ever been heard against Nick Norton, he was a model soldier and for the charge of highway robbery to be brought against him astonished all of the officers.

"Yet here is the letter of the Ranchero King, gentlemen, he had not been gone half an hour from the fort, before he met the sergeant, and now he has gone on his way leaving Norton dead in the trail and this communication to explain the matter," the colonel said.

"Colonel Elwood, will you permit me to go to the scene, sir, and Lieutenant Turpin to accompany me, while an ambulance could follow to bring the body back to the fort, and I would like to walk over the ground before other tracks are made," said Surgeon Powell.

"It is just what I wished to ask you to do, Doctor Powell, to go at once, and Turpin, you can get some one to take your place as officer of the day, and so accompany Surgeon Powell," said the colonel.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRAGIC SPOT.

SURGEON POWELL and Lieutenant Turpin lost no time in mounting and getting away from the fort; the latter issuing an order for an ambulance and several soldiers to follow later.

"I only wish Texas Jack was himself again, for he would be a great aid in looking for the suspicious elements in this affair," said Surgeon Powell.

"You think, then, Powell, that there is something underhand in the affair?"

"I cannot but think so."

"The colonel, I am sure, does not."

"If so, he keeps his suspicion to himself."

"You suspect who, or what?"

"I do not know, Turpin, only I cannot believe that Nick Norton was a scoundrel."

"I have been in action with him time and again. I have seen him risk his life a score of times to save a comrade, and often we have been on a lone trail together and I know something of the man and his life in the past, and it would take the strongest proof to convince me that he was guilty of a lawless deed."

"It is from no knowledge of the Ranchero King that I say this, only a wish to save the memory of Sergeant Norton from infamy, that I wish to overlook the scene and take in all that there is to consider for and against, and Texas Jack would feel the same way."

"So do I, Powell, for I cannot get up a very enthusiastic admiration for this Ranchero King."

"He is a gentleman, yes, and has many good qualities doubtless; but he is too ready to kill, regarding human life as cheap as the life of a brute, and he may have had some motive for killing the sergeant."

"What did the captain of his troop say as to Norton's going?"

"Simply that he came and asked a few hours leave for a ride upon the prairie to exercise his horse, and the sergeant took the trail half an hour before the Ranchero King did."

"That looks as though he had gone out to meet the Mexican?"

"Yes."

"Then suspicion in that is against the sergeant, though his motive might not have been to hold up the Ranchero King."

"Very true; but now tell me just how Texas Jack is?"

"Improving slowly, but I hope surely."

"He will not be in the saddle for weeks yet."

"I am sorry his pard Buckskin Sam is not here."

"So am I, for he is a very remarkable man, and I am glad that the colonel was so fortunate as to have him take Texas Jack's place."

"He has gone with Colonel Sandos into Mexico, I believe, but will soon return, and if any man can pick up evidence off of blind trail, Sam Hall can do it."

The clump of trees were now in sight ahead, and riding on more rapidly they halted within a hundred yards of where they saw the body of the sergeant lying, a few coyotes stealthily creeping up for a feast.

"We will stake our horses out here, Turpin, for I wish no confusing tracks," said Surgeon Powell, and the two officers dismounted and made their horses fast; then walked into the spot where Sergeant Norton lay.

Kneeling by his side Surgeon Powell placed his hand upon his pulse, then his ear over the heart.

"He is dead, but it has not been over a quarter of an hour since the breath left his body."

"He was not dead when the Ranchero King left him, or certainly not when he wrote that letter, for the body is still warm."

"It has been three hours since the Ranchero King left the fort," said Dick Turpin.

"Yes, and an hour since the letter came to the hand of the colonel, for we came here at a rapid pace."

"Poor Norton, he is beyond mortal aid now, and it is a shame that he dies with a stain upon him."

"But now to investigate."

With a skill that was wonderful, and that won the admiration of Lieutenant Turpin, splendid borderman though he was, Surgeon Powell set to work in his investigation.

"Here is where Sergeant Norton came to the timber, and he waited just here in its shelter, so that it is certain that he did lie in wait for the Ranchero King," said Surgeon Powell, pointing out the tracks of the sergeant's horse to his brother officer.

"Yes, there is no denying that, and so far the evidence carries out the statement of the Ranchero King; but go on with your sign reading, Surgeon Powell, for you are a wonder," assured Lieutenant Dick Turpin.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

READING SIGNS.

THE Surgeon Scout went on in his quiet way, taking in all that he saw, and placing his own construction upon the signs as he saw them.

"Turpin," he called out suddenly, after some minutes of silence.

"Yes, Doc."

"There was another horseman here."

"The Ranchero King and the sergeant."

"No, a third."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"But at the time of the affair between the Ranchero King and the sergeant?"

"Yes, or after."

"You see the signs then?"

"Yes, mark this trail here."

"I see it."

"It came from that direction, and halted just here."

"The sergeant lay there, his horse having wandered off a short distance."

"There is no sign that the Ranchero King dismounted, and yet his horse was halted here for some little time."

"Then he rode away and slowly."

"There goes his trail."

"Now the sergeant fell here and yet did not die when he fell."

"He either walked to the shelter of this tree, or was carried."

"I see that the one who rode the third horse dismounted here near where the sergeant fell."

"He must have carried him to this spot where the body lies, and where he died."

"Here are a man's tracks by the side of the sergeant."

"These tracks lead to his horse and the trail then follows on in the direction taken by the Ranchero King."

"Some one who was with him, or joined him here?"

"No, who came after, according to the trail."

"The Ranchero's letter spoke as though the sergeant had been instantly killed; but the man who came after he left I am sure found the sergeant alive."

"See here, the coat, and the shirt of the sergeant are open, cut with a knife was the latter, and upon the wound is a handkerchief saturated with water, to check the flow of blood."

"The bullet entered the lung, and went near the heart, but was not fatal until some time after it was given."

"The sergeant had no canteen with him, so where was the water obtained that saturated this handkerchief?"

"Go on, Powell, for I see all as clear as noonday under your reading of the signs," said Dick Turpin.

"Now this third man on the scene found the sergeant alive and was with him when he died."

"Then he took the trail of the Ranchero."

"Of course all this must be a secret, save to the colonel, but this third man must be found, for I believe he knows just what happened."

"Then it is best to find this third man?"

"Yes, and I will go on the trail and see where it leads, though I cannot leave Texas Jack for any length of time."

"I will go with you, Powell, and we can at least follow it to the river if it leads there."

"Yes, for I am interested in this stranger, and he knows the truth of the sergeant's death."

"But there comes the ambulance, and remember, Turpin, the story of the letter must be accepted until we can find the man that knows the truth."

"Yes, I will keep the secret, Doc," answered the lieutenant, and the ambulance then came up and with it was a lieutenant of the sergeant's troop and half a dozen men.

"This is a terrible affair, Powell, that we hear of the cause of Norton's death," said Lieutenant Verner, as he joined his brother officers.

"Yes, it is, indeed, a terrible affair," answered Doctor Powell, and he gave orders to place the body in the ambulance and then said:

"We will join you later, Verner, for I am going with Turpin a short distance along the trail," and the two soon departed, leaving Lieutenant Verner to return to the fort with the body of the sergeant, whose death, and the rumored cause, had fell like a bombshell upon his comrades at the post.

Riding on along the trail the Surgeon Scout narrowly watched it, and pointed out to Lieutenant Turpin that these were the tracks of two horses, one made by the animal ridden by the Ranchero King, the other by the third horseman who had appeared upon the scene, whoever he might be.

Riding rapidly, for the trail was readily

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"No, a third."

"You don't mean it?"

followed, they reached the river, at a ford quite a distance from the one where Buckskin Sam and Colonel Sandos had gone into camp.

This ford was an easier one to cross, and the trails of both horses led into the river.

"Well, he certainly was following on after the Don, but whether friend or foe cannot be told," said Surgeon Powell.

"As the Ranchero King made no mention in the letter of any one else, my idea is that he did not know of this third party," Dick Turpin rejoined.

"It may be; but in some way we must find out who that third man was, and I will see if I cannot get off for twenty-four hours to go upon the trail; but now we can do no more than return to the fort," said Surgeon Powell, and the two started back to the fort at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ON SPECIAL DUTY.

THE death of the sergeant certainly created a sensation at Fort Blanco.

He was known by sight to every man, woman and child at the fort, and all liked him.

He was a handsome, courteous gentleman in his manners, and his comrades regarded him as a beau ideal soldier who should have had the fate to wear shoulder-straps instead of stripes on the blouse.

Believed to be the soul of honor, it was a blow to many when it was asserted that he had died in the commission of a crime.

The story went the rounds that the sergeant, tempted by the jewelry the Ranchero King always wore, and the fact that he was reported always to have a large sum of money about him, had gone to the captain of his troop, obtained a short leave and then had boldly placed himself upon the trail to rob the Ranchero King.

The news was a bitter blow to the soldiers, and though there were many who never for a moment thought of doubting the truth of the letter, sent back by the Ranchero King, there were a few who boldly said that they could not believe that Sergeant Nicholas Norton could be guilty of a dishonorable act, that the Ranchero King had acted hastily, fired upon him before he knew his real intention.

Of course, with the stain upon his name, the sergeant could not be buried with military honors, and so he was quietly laid to rest without public demonstration, and as soon as he was brought back to the fort.

It was nightfall when Surgeon Powell and Lieutenant Turpin returned and at once sought an interview with the colonel, no others being present.

"Well, Doctor Powell, what discovery have you made, for if any one could find anything to mitigate this severe charge against Sergeant Norton, you could?" said Colonel Elwood.

"I have made a discovery, colonel, which Lieutenant Turpin and I deemed best to make known only to you, sir.

"We have discovered that there was a third horseman on the scene, either at the time, or soon after the killing of Norton, and that the sergeant must have lived over an hour, perhaps longer, after he was shot."

"This is indeed an important find, Surgeon Powell, and I hope something may be found out to show that Norton was not really the highwayman that Don Marlo claims he was, though I must admit that the Ranchero King is a nervy fellow, and not given to exaggerated reports, or hasty action."

"Very true, sir; but he does not speak of a third person being upon the scene, nor that Norton was not instantly killed."

"We followed the trail of the Ranchero King to the river, and this third man followed it, too, but either as foe, friend or stranger we could not know."

"Then what do you deem best to be done in the matter, Surgeon Powell?"

"As you ask me, colonel, I will frankly say that I would like to get away for a day or so to see the end of this stranger's trail."

"Can you leave Texas Jack now with safety, do you think?"

"I do, sir; but I will be certain of it or not go, for we cannot afford to lose Jack."

"Indeed we cannot."

"Of course the other surgeons can care

for him just as well as I, sir, but we, after our consultation, decided upon performing an operation if Jack's brain was not clear when fever and delirium left him.

"Of course I will be the one to do the work, but until the necessity demands it, I can readily be spared and the others look after him."

"Then you wish to take this trail?"

"I do, sir, and for two reasons, first to find out who this third man is, and second to see the Ranchero King and have a talk with him."

"You are right, and the truth is, when a man like Sergeant Norton is accused and killed, his life taken upon American soil by a Mexican, I deem it my duty to at once request from the Ranchero King a visit in person to give the full statement of the case to a court martial of officers whom I appoint, and so I desire you to go upon this special business, requesting his return with you, and that he can bring with him what officers of the Mexican Army he may desire to select."

"When will you be ready to start, Doctor Powell?"

"To-night, sir," was the prompt reply of the Surgeon Scout.

CHAPTER XL.

ON A MYSTERIOUS TRAIL.

"How is Jack, Powell?"

"Steadily improving."

"You can leave him then, you think?"

"Yes, for his fever is not so high and he is better."

"If his fever breaks, delirium will pass away and then we can tell whether his brain was affected by the bullet, or by the fever."

"And you expect his fever to break soon?"

"Yes, within a couple of days I feel certain, Turpin."

"And if his brain is not clear you will perform an operation?"

"Yes, remove the pressure of the skull upon the brain."

"Then you can go upon this special duty the colonel has selected you for?"

"Yes."

"When do you start?"

"Within the hour, Turpin."

"And my best wishes go with you, Powell, for if any man can find out the truth of that mystery you are that man."

"Thanks, Turpin, but it is a trail of mystery certainly."

"Good-bye, and as the chaplain always says: 'Pray for me,'" and with a grasp of the hand Surgeon Frank Powell went on to his quarters.

He made his arrangements for his journey quickly and well, his servant having put up for him a cold lunch and a bag of provisions.

He took with him his repeating rifle, most dangerous in his hands, and his belt of arms, all of his weapons being in perfect condition.

As he was going upon a special and official mission, he went in uniform, and the horse that he rode had not its superior upon the frontier.

A couple of rubber and woolen blankets, with an air pillow, completed his outfit, and an hour before midnight the Surgeon Scout rode out of the fort upon the trail to Del Monte Hacienda the home of the Ranchero King.

He passed the spot where the sergeant had been killed, without drawing rein and made no halt until he came to the Rio Grande.

He knew the country fairly well, and soon found a good camping-place for man and beast upon the American side of the river.

Several hours' rest was sufficient for a man of his iron frame and endurance, and after eating breakfast he rode into the river and crossed to the other side.

Two villainous-looking Mexicans were seated on their ponies watching him, but if they had any intention of attacking him his uniform doubtless awed them out of it.

The Surgeon Scout glanced at them, ready for any demonstration on their part, and asked in good Spanish, if he was not on the right trail to the Hacienda Del Monte.

The reply was in the affirmative, and the two men wore a pleasant expression, as though congratulating themselves that they had made no bad break.

But Doctor Powell, whether he was on the trail to Del Monte Hacienda or not, was following the tracks left by the Ranchero King and the mysterious third horseman who had appeared upon the scene when Sergeant Norton had lost his life.

The surgeon was glad to discover, too, that the two trails led on toward Del Monte Hacienda, and that the "Mysterious Horseman" had not overtaken the Ranchero King at the river the tracks plainly revealed to the experienced eye of the officer scout.

"There is a difference of some hours in the time that these two trails were made."

"I begin to feel certain now that the stranger was following the Ranchero King; but it will not be long before I know."

So on the Surgeon Scout rode, gradually ascending toward the range of mountains that loomed up before him, and where he knew was the ranch of Don Marlo Fuentes.

It was toward even when he came in sight of the hacienda, situated fort-like upon a mountain spur, and very difficult of access should there be a force within to defend it.

As he came to where he could distinctly see the hacienda, he also observed that the trail of the Mysterious Horseman halted there.

There were signs that he had halted just where the hacienda came into view, and the tracks showed that he had remained there for half an hour or more, as though to reconnoiter.

Then the trail bore off to the right among the timber, and after a moment of hesitation the Surgeon Scout followed it, branching off from the trail of the Ranchero King and the direct track to the Hacienda Del Monte.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE SURGEON'S WELCOME.

SURGEON POWELL had not gone very far on the trail of the Mysterious Horseman, when he came to the indications of a camp not very long deserted.

There was a camp-fire smoldering there, and the grass cropped about near appeared to have been fed upon for a day or more.

"So he came here and camped did he, after he had seen the hacienda?"

"Now I am more than ever convinced that whatever this Mysterious Horseman might have seen and found out, the Ranchero King did not see him or know that he was upon his trail."

"The stranger did not follow beyond the point where he came in sight of the hacienda, and then he came here and camped for the night."

"Now to see which way he went from here."

He had already dismounted, and looking about for the trail he saw that it made a bend and returned toward the river.

"Well, I have to go on, for my business now lies with Don Marlo, and I can pick the trail of the Mysterious Horseman up on my return, if I am alone."

So saying the Surgeon Scout retraced his way to where he had left the trail to the hacienda, and then resumed his way toward it.

A man saw his approach and when he rode up to the massive gateway said politely:

"Is the senor gone astray, or was he seeking the Hacienda Del Monte?"

"I am seeking the Hacienda Del Monte."

"This is it, senor."

"I have come to see the Ranchero King."

"Don Marlo Fuentes you refer to, senor?"

"Ah, yes."

"Is he at home?"

"I will find out, if the senor will give me his name."

"Do you not know whether the Don is at home or not?"

"I know only that, senor, which my master wishes me to know," was the discreet reply.

"You are wise, indeed."

"Please say to Don Marlo Fuentes that Surgeon Powell, of Fort Blanco, desires to see him."

"He was my patient when at the fort, and I trust he is well?"

"I will ascertain for the American senor," answered the man, and he walked away leaving the surgeon still outside of the adobe walls.

In a short while he returned, and with a most polite salutation, invited the surgeon to enter, stating that the Don was at home, and would be most pleased to see the Senor Powell.

The surgeon's horse was taken by a servant and he was conducted into the grand old house.

"If it had been built for a fort it could not have answered the purpose better.

"The Ranchero certainly lives here like the King he is called," and the surgeon glanced about him in admiration of his surroundings.

Just then the Ranchero King entered the room, still a little pale, courtly and with cordial hospitality welcomed his guest, for the surgeon had been most kind to him when he was at the fort.

"This is an honor I had not anticipated, senor.

"I will have you at once shown to your room, and after you have refreshed yourself we will have a long talk together.

"I hope all goes well at the fort?"

Half an hour after, having brushed the dust of travel off, Doctor Powell was welcomed once more by the Ranchero King, and conducted into the spacious dining-hall of the hacienda.

Surgeon Powell took in all that there was to be seen, without, however, appearing to do so, the solid silver service, the silent, well-trained servants, excellent wines, and the most tempting repast set before him.

He had taken a look at the wound of the Ranchero King and dressed it, telling him that it would give him no further trouble, and when after dinner, with fragrant cigars between their lips, the two sat upon the cool piazza overlooking the valley and mountains the Surgeon Scout said:

"As my time is limited, senor, I will at once make known to you why I have come to see you, for my visit is an official one, only your kind hospitality did not allow me sooner to speak of the matter."

"I shall be glad to know why Surgeon Powell has honored me with his presence," was the quiet response of the Ranchero King.

CHAPTER XLII.

APPLYING THE PROBE.

DOCTOR FRANK POWELL bowed at the response of the Ranchero King, blew the fragrant smoke of his cigar from his lips in a cloud and then said, assuming an official tone:

"I am instructed by Colonel Elwood, Don Marlo Fuentes, to inform you that the note sent him by the horse of Sergeant Nicholas Norton was received."

"I am glad to know that it was, as I had condemned myself for not having returned to the fort and made my report, but I was weak from loss of blood, had a long ride before me, and so supposed that the horse would do as a courier."

"Your note explained in part, sir, the death of Sergeant Norton, who fell by your hand, as he had attempted to hold you up on the trail and demand money of you, senor."

"Such was the case in point of fact, Doctor Powell."

"I grant that, senor, but the fact remains that Sergeant Norton was a non-commissioned officer of the United States Army, one whose service the past four years has been unimpeachable, and he had a record as a brave man and splendid soldier."

The Ranchero King raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders in a way that asked plainly:

"But, who am I, his accuser?"

"Now, senor the circumstances under which Sergeant Norton lost his life, are peculiar, for he being a soldier of the American Army was killed on American territory by you, a Mexican, and under a charge that he was a road-agent."

"Under such circumstances Colonel Elwood deemed it his duty to send me to see you and to learn from you the full statement of the affair, while he begs that you, upon a date that he will name, will come to Fort Blanco and give your version of the affair before officers whom he will name as a tribunal, and that you will ask to accompany you any officers of the Mexican Army whom you may care to have with you."

"I cannot but accede to the request of Colonel Elwood, for of course, coming to a Mexican subject, it cannot be a command."

"He will appreciate your kindness, senor, for it will relieve him from a great responsibility."

"Name the day, and I will be present, only let it not be for a couple of weeks hence."

The Surgeon Scout thought a moment and mentioned a date two weeks and a day off.

The Ranchero King took out his notebook and jotted down the date, and Surgeon Powell said:

"Now, senor, may I ask if you will give the story of the affair with Sergeant Norton?"

"Wherein is the use, if I am to appear officially?"

"Because, senor, a report must be at once made of the affair, and your letter was not explicit enough under the circumstances."

"I will answer any questions you may desire to ask, senor."

"Thank you, Don Marlo," and Doctor Powell took out his notebook and pencil and asked:

"Was the sergeant awaiting your approach, senor?"

"He was."

"With apparent hostile intent?"

"No, and then I was caught off my guard, as I had not anticipated finding a highwayman in a United States soldier."

"True."

"And he demanded gold of you?"

"Yes, the sum he named was a large one, and he said he must have it or I should suffer the consequences."

"You refused?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"He still made his demand, and to gain a chance to act I argued the matter until I found a chance to draw and fire."

"You could not have covered him and made him prisoner, senor?"

"No, I am not one to be merciful under such circumstances."

"I forgot his uniform, recalled only that he was a trail robber and fired."

"Did you kill him instantly?"

"Oh yes, for I throw no shots away."

"Was he alone, senor?"

"Yes."

"Might he not have had comrades unseen by you?"

The Ranchero King looked fixedly at the surgeon and replied after a moment:

"No, for the timber was open. He fell from his horse dead, and I then made the note and tied it to the saddle of my dumb courier, and sent him off on the trail."

"And you were alone, senor?"

"Oh yes."

"This is true, for he knows nothing of the Mysterious Horseman," mused Surgeon Powell.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN.

At last the questions of Surgeon Powell regarding the presence of any one else upon the scene of the tragedy caused the Ranchero King to ask:

"Why is it you suspect that any one was with me, senor?"

It was Surgeon Powell's opening for a home thrust, and looking Don Marlo straight in the face he said:

"Because I know that there was another person there, senor."

"Ah!"

The exclamation was uttered sharply, and the piercing eyes of the scout saw the start the man gave and that his face changed color.

But he had probed to the quick, and he hastened to say:

"You see, I was in hopes of finding a witness, not from any wish to doubt you, Don Marlo, but to verify your account of the affair, and I supposed at first that I had done so, as there was the trail there of a third horse."

"A trail of another horse?" quickly asked the Ranchero King.

"Yes, senor, and I supposed of course you would know of his presence; but a close investigation revealed the fact that he must have passed after you left, and have been one of your cowboys, as his trail led to your

ranch, so after all I failed to secure a hoped-for witness."

"I regret the circumstance, for as you asserted, it is better to have a witness."

"Still, I will have inquiry made among my men and find out which one it was who followed the trail after me, though why he should have been on Texas soil I do not know, and this will perhaps prevent my discovery of him, as my orders are very stringent and my men must remain upon this side of the water."

"Then it will doubtless be hard to find him out, and in fact of no use, as he could not have witnessed the affair and not have been seen by you."

"Very true, senor, but I can make inquiry in a general way," and Tonio was at once sent for and soon made his appearance.

Told to find out what one of the *vaqueros* had been absent across the river, Tonio departed and the Ranchero King remarked:

"Do you know, senor, I had a visit from your friend Senor Hall?"

"From Buckskin Sam?"

"Yes, and he was not alone."

"Indeed?"

"He had gone off, I heard, from the scene of the Indian attack upon the daughter of Colonel Elwood and her friend Miss De Silva, to accompany Colonel Sandos to the river."

"He did so, and crossed with him."

"Then he visited the sister of Captain Corsala, and he accompanied her here on a mission of importance, for it seems some of my *vaqueros* have again been in mischief, and robbed the grave of the Senorita Corsala's brother."

"That was cruel indeed."

"Yes, but she is avenged, for I sent the men at once to the camps and had them hanged."

"I forgot to ask Tonio if my orders were carried out, though few dare to disobey them."

"You really did not order the culprits hanged without trial, senor?"

"Oh, yes, for in these mountains I rule and my word is law, be it for life or death—have a fresh cigar, senor."

Surgeon Powell did take a fresh cigar, complimented the Ranchero King upon the excellence of the tobacco, and conversation turned upon several subjects until the return of Tonio, when the Ranchero King asked:

"Well, Tonio, what discovery have you made?"

"One of the men crossed into Texas, senor."

"When?"

"Four days ago."

"For what purpose?"

"To see his lady love, senor."

"A commendable reason; but who was he?"

"Marco Aquero, senor."

"Had he leave?"

"Yes, senor, I gave him leave."

"Where is he?"

"I ordered him to report here, senor, as I supposed you might wish to question him."

"I do."

"Now about the two men I ordered hanged."

"The two who robbed the grave of Captain Corsala, senor?" asked Tonio, and Surgeon Powell could not but wonder from the question how many hangings generally occurred at the Del Monte Ranch a week.

"Yes."

"I had them hanged, senor, as you ordered."

"And the men witnessed the hanging and knew their crime?"

"Yes, senor."

"Very well, Tonio, now send Marco Aquero to me."

A few moments after a handsome young *vaquero* entered the room and politely saluted the Ranchero King and the Surgeon Scout.

He had a deuce-I-care air, was dressed like a dandy, and said in a courteous but decided way:

"You have sent for me, senor?"

"Yes, you have been into Texas?"

"I have, senor."

"Your purpose?"

"To see a pretty little Mexican girl who lives there, senor."

"You had leave?"

"Yes, señor."

"You returned by the canyon ford trail?"

"Yes, señor."

"What discovery did you make?"

"I suppose I must out with it, señor; but I saw one of the *vaqueros* alone on the trail and on foot."

"He was wounded and told me he had been shot by a man in buckskin, a Texan, but escaped from him in the darkness."

"Why he had been into Texas he did not state, in fact, he was dying when I met him, and he died soon after, but asked me to pledge him I would not speak of meeting him, or say who he was, as he wished to fill an unknown grave."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE VAQUERO'S STORY.

"So you promised him what he asked?"

"I did not, señor, for he ran on so eagerly he did not give me time."

"I told no one however save my pard, Frisco, and we two buried him."

"When you asked me, however, señor, I deemed it my duty to tell you what had occurred."

"You have acted wisely, Marco Aquero," said the Ranchero King with one of his sinister smiles.

"Now who was this man who went across the Rio without leave, was shot by a Texan in buckskin, died in your presence and did not wish his name known; in fact, wished to rest in an unknown grave?"

"We knew him only as Leon, señor."

"Yes, I recall the man I think."

"Did he say why he had gone into Texas?"

"No, señor."

"Did he make any confession before he died?"

"No, señor, he made no confession, but I found upon him a sealed package which I intended to send to the address upon it, but as you now know the circumstances of Leon's death, I will hand it over to you, señor, along with some gold, a watch, chain and ring which he had also."

"The gold and valuables you can keep, the package I will have delivered."

Marco Aquero took out of his pockets the sealed envelope and the things he had taken from the dead man.

The former he handed to the Ranchero King, and the latter he returned to his pocket.

One glance at the address on the large envelope and the Ranchero King's face paled.

This Surgeon Powell distinctly saw, but he said quietly:

"Why this is addressed to my old friend, Colonel Leon Rebello."

"The young fellow was doubtless his son, gone to the bad, and who was leading the life of a *vaquero*."

"I will see that the colonel receives the letter, and will write him the particulars of the death of the one who doubtless wrote the communication."

"You can go, Marco."

The young man departed, and almost immediately Surgeon Powell arose to go, when Don Marlo said:

"You see, Doctor Powell, how you discovered a third person in the affair between Sergeant Norton and myself."

"Now this man Leon was the one beyond all doubt, and he would have been a witness in my favor had not a Texan killed him, so it seems in this case an American has killed a Mexican," and the Ranchero King smiled, while Surgeon Powell remarked:

"Yes, señor, there are scores of deaths along the Rio Grande, on both shores, that are never known or accounted for; but I must thank you for your hospitality and take my leave."

The Don was most urgent in his request for Surgeon Powell to remain all night, but in vain, as the doctor said that he must start upon his return.

"But you will be overtaken by night before you reach the river."

"I do not mind the darkness, señor," was the reply, and soon after Frank Powell took his leave.

He had just gotten out of sight of the

hacienda when he saw a horseman coming toward him at a gallop.

It was Marco Aquero, and as he approached the surgeon drew rein and said politely:

"One moment, señor?"

"Yes, señor, I was returning to the hacienda to tell the Don that Leon said that the man who shot him was Texas Jack, the Ranger."

"You are mistaken, my friend, for the man you speak of lies at the point of death at Fort Blanco, from a wound he received from a man in ambush some time ago."

"Then Leon was mistaken, señor."

"He was; but ride back with me, for there is no need of reporting to your chief that which is false, as it was not Texas Jack, take my word for it."

"I will, señor."

"And let me ask you if you will dispose of the articles you had there to-day, for I will pay you a good price for the watch, chain and ring?"

"Yes, señor, I would rather have the gold," and Marco Aquero took out the articles named and Surgeon Powell looked at them with considerable interest, and said:

"I will give you a hundred pesos for the lot."

"All right, señor," and the things changed hands, and pocketing them, Surgeon Powell rode on for a while with the young *vaquero*, asking him many questions as to the man Leon, his meeting with him, the locality and all that he had said while dying.

CHAPTER XLV.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

It was nearly sunset as Surgeon Powell neared the river, and he was congratulating himself that he would soon be on the Texas shore, when suddenly a man appeared in the trail before him.

Had Surgeon Powell expected to be held up, the idea was quickly dispelled by the action of the man, who quickly raised his hands above his head in a manner indicative of peaceful intent.

Riding forward, and ready for any act of hostility or treachery, Surgeon Powell said, as he drew near:

"Why, you are Buck Parker the outlaw prisoner to whom Texas Jack gave his freedom!"

"You have a good eye for remembering faces, Surgeon Powell, for I am the outlaw, Buck Parker, returned to my old life of outlaws again, and yet not so wholly bad that I cannot do a good deed in warning you of danger."

Surgeon Powell had held several conversations with the outlaw when he was a prisoner at the fort, and he had been much impressed with him then.

He had since learned confidentially from Buckskin Sam of the service he had rendered him, and now when he appeared before him in Mexico, his first thought had been that he intended to also do him a good turn and he was not mistaken, for the outlaw continued:

"There is no need of telling you, Doctor Powell, that I am a Robber Ranger, for you know it, and being one you can understand how it is that I am able to inform you that you are riding into a trap."

"Ah, an ambush?"

"Yes, but on the other side of the river, and one that is cleverly planned to have it appear as though you were attacked and slain by Indians."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, but they are Mexicans, disguised as Comanches, and are in ambush some miles from the river awaiting your coming."

"How did they know of my coming?"

"Do not ask, for I cannot, will not tell; but I know, and hence others could know, and I am here, on foot to leave no trail, to warn you of your danger, and tell you what to do."

"Parker, I believe you and trust you, while I certainly appreciate your good deed in my behalf."

"Tell me, please, where these men are, and how long they will remain?"

"They are at Panther Pass, and their orders were to await your return from Del Monte Hacienda."

"How many are there?"

"Three."

"Thank you; forewarned is being forearmed, and will be able to act accordingly."

"But you must not go that trail."

"I know no other."

"I will direct you by a trail that will lead you to the Whirlpool Ford, miles below, and you can cross there, for you know it, I believe?"

"Yes, I have crossed there."

"May I ask when you heard from Buckskin Sam last?"

"Not since he went to the river several days ago with Colonel Sandos."

"You have not heard from him since?"

"Well, yes, or rather I have heard of him, for Don Marlo Fuentes said that he had visited him at his hacienda the day before."

"Doctor Powell, I will tell you a secret."

"Yes, Parker."

"Buckskin Sam is a prisoner."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Of whom?"

"The Robber Rangers."

Doctor Powell looked straight into the face of the outlaw captain and said:

"I know Sam Hall well, and he is not a man to be easily taken prisoner, Parker."

"Circumstances alter cases, Doctor Powell."

"He was entrapped, and is a prisoner, but let me tell you that though his life is threatened he shall not be put to death, my word for it."

"You are a strange man, Parker, and outlaw though you are, self-confessed, I have confidence in you."

"But where is poor Buckskin Sam?"

"That I cannot tell you, señor, only rest assured that no harm shall befall him, as you have my pledge for it."

"Also, Surgeon Powell, do not make any attempt to rescue him, for it cannot be done by force, and if kept quiet is far easier to accomplish by strategy, and he shall be set free when it is possible, just as truly as Texas Jack set me free when I was his prisoner."

"Then I will trust all to you, Parker."

"I thank you for those words, Surgeon Powell, and I will prove that your confidence is not misplaced."

"Now you must follow me, so I can place you right for the trail to the Whirlpool Ford," and the outlaw captain led the way off of the trail Frank Powell was then following.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A MIDNIGHT CALL.

It was after the nightfall an hour or more, when Surgeon Powell, following the trail upon which the outlaw captain had placed him, drew rein at the brink of the Rio Grande at the Whirlpool Ford.

He gave his horse a long time to drink, as though he was lost in thought, and then suddenly muttered:

"I will go now, for it will be best."

Turning his horse back from the river he started off on the trail leading inland into Mexico.

No man knew the danger better than he, but he was one to face any danger that duty demanded of him.

Riding rapidly once he got into the uplands, he pushed his horse hard like one who knew there was rest for him at the end of the trail he then traveled.

After miles were passed over there came into sight the glimmer of a light, and the Surgeon Scout muttered:

"I have not been on this trail but once before, but I think that is the hacienda."

Soon, out of the gloom rose the walls of a hacienda and as he approached it there came a sharp challenge in Spanish.

He answered it in the same language and then said:

"Say to the officer of the guard that it is an American officer who desires an interview with Colonel Sandos."

The uniform was seen, and the Mexican sentinel was exceedingly courteous, so that in a few minutes an officer appeared and said:

"The colonel bids me conduct you to him, señor, for he has not yet retired."

"Ah, Surgeon Powell, I am delighted to see you, but no ill tidings I trust from our friends at Blanco," said Colonel Sandos ad-

vancing to meet his visitor as he entered the room.

"All goes well at Blanco, colonel, I am glad to say; but you must pardon me for disturbing you at midnight, as I came upon a matter I deem important."

"No excuses, senor, you are most welcome."

"I will order supper for you, and a room prepared, for—"

"Supper I will accept, colonel, but not your further hospitality, as I am anxious to cross the river by dawn at the latest."

"You know best, Surgeon Powell."

"But now tell me how I can serve you," and calling a servant and ordering supper prepared for his guest, the colonel turned to Frank Powell to learn what it was that had brought him there at that hour into Mexico.

"Colonel Sandos, do you know an officer of your service by the name of Rebello?" began the doctor.

"Intimately; Colonel Rebello, now the chief of the Military Spies, or Secret Service men as you call them."

"Has he a son, do you know?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Leon Rebello, a fine young officer, and who is one of the commanders of the detachment of the Military Spies."

"Have you heard of the young man lately, senor?"

"Well, yes, I heard of a very dangerous scheme he had undertaken to ferret out the outlaws of the Rio Grande and their haunts."

"Colonel Sandos, here is a watch and chain, and a ring taken from a young Mexican who was killed across the border in Texas a couple of days ago," and Surgeon Powell handed over the articles purchased from the *vaquero*, Marco Aquero.

With a glance at them the colonel said:

"I recognize the watch, chain and ring as Leon Rebello's, for I have seen him wear them, and more, the former was presented to him by an officer of my command for saving the life of one of his men."

"Poor Leon, do you mean that he was killed?"

"I will tell you the circumstances, Colonel Sandos, and also, just what brought me into Mexico, but I do so with the request that you receive all in the strictest confidence."

"I shall so receive all that you care to make known, Doctor Powell," was the response of Colonel Sandos, and then the whole story was told to him from the moment of his departure with Buckskin Sam for his home, after leaving Estelle Elwood and Delle De Silva in the care of Lieutenant Turpin, as also the Ranchero King.

"Well, Doctor Powell, you surprise me immeasurably, I assure you."

"It is a strange circumstance for a sergeant in your army to turn road-agent, and yet a remarkable thing for a man of Don Marlo's position to accuse him of it, if the charge were untrue."

"I am sure that you doubt Don Marlo, and I know that Buckskin Sam is also suspicious of him, as is also our friend Texas Jack; but, outside of his mania for taking human life I can find no clue of real evil against this mysterious man the Ranchero King."

"Regarding Buckskin Sam's being a prisoner I do not know what to say, and also that the outlaws hold the Senorita Corsala also in their power, though this is for ransom, where they seek revenge on the Texan."

"It seems strange that you Americans must post us on this side of the doings of our outlaws, but so it is."

"I will send at once to the Corsala Hacienda to see what can be learned regarding the Senorita Corsala, and I hope I can keep you here until I receive word."

"No, senor, I must go across the river by dawn; but I will be at the camp on the cliff, to-morrow night, and will be glad to receive any communication you care to send me there."

"I will come myself, senor, for you may have news that you wish to make known to me."

"I will also know if the Senorita Corsala has returned home, and we can talk over some plan for her rescue and that of Buckskin Sam if we can decide upon it."

Soon after Surgeon Powell mounted his horse to start for the river and to his surprise he found a body-guard awaiting him.

"There must be no mistake, senor, no ac-

cident—the escort will accompany you to the river," said the colonel firmly, and Surgeon Powell did not refuse.

CHAPTER XLVII.

FOR GOLD AND REVENGE.

I WILL now return to the time when Buckskin Sam found himself in the toils of a lariat, and was dragged suddenly backward out of his saddle to the ground.

Nimble as a cat he caught on his feet, to be the next instant ridden down by a horse rushed hard against him.

Half stunned by the blow and fall, ere he could regain his feet, and while he was powerless by his arms being held tightly in the lasso coil, Buckskin Sam felt a revolver muzzle pressed hard in his face and heard the low threat in Spanish:

"Resistance will mean death to you."

"I know when the game goes against me," was the reply of the Texan, and while one of the men still held a revolver muzzle in his face, a second one disarmed him, a third having lassoed the horse ridden by Senorita Corsala and prevented her escape.

She sat in her saddle white-faced but calm, wondering at the position she found herself in, while as she saw that the Texan was securely bound, she said with flashing eyes and a voice that rung with indignation:

"So you traitors have gained a victory over us?"

It was her three *vaqueros* that she addressed, the men who had been her escort from the ranch.

They had planned well and executed their vile deed most cleverly.

With no dread of evil, Buckskin Sam was riding in front of them, when, at a signal from the ringleader the lariats had been thrown and the Texan insnared, and the horse of Juanita Corsala brought to a halt.

"I can understand your attack on me, for I am not one of your race and Mexicans hate Americans; but what on earth have you made war against this lady for?" said Buckskin Sam.

"She is worth her weight in gold, for she is able to pay a big ransom for her release."

"Oh! that is your motive, is it; but you could not have captured me, expecting a big ransom."

"Yes."

"How much?"

"It cannot be measured by gold, for it is revenge."

"Doubtless, for I have downed men of your stripe whenever the situation demanded it."

"And so you are after all no better than outlaws?" said Juanita Corsala, with biting sarcasm.

"About that, senorita."

"Trade on the trails got dull and so we turned to the life of an honest *vaquero* for awhile."

"And I have harbored such as you?"

"It is lucky we were there, for we protected you from worse men than we are."

"You were kind to us, but your brother was a brute, and we owe him many a grudge."

"But getting gold is the trade we follow, and you will have to pay well for your freedom."

"Name your sum, and for this senor, too, for his act of kindness to me got him into trouble, for I will pay you for both."

"You know me, and that if I pledge you the gold you will get it."

"Oh, yes, you are honest enough in your intention, senorita, but the padre tells us Hades is paved with good intentions, so we wish the gold in hand before you go free."

"Yes, it will be gold for you, but no sum can buy Buckskin Sam, for he is doomed," said another of the men, while the third broke suddenly in with:

"Silence, you fools!"

"Come, senorita, don't listen to them for they have not a word to say, as the one whom we serve ordered your capture and we had to obey, for in our band it is death to disobey."

"Then you must be Robber Rangers," said Buckskin Sam.

"That is just what we are, and I guess you've called in the chips of many of our band, Buckskin Sam."

"And will again when opportunity offers."

"It will never offer, for you are doomed, Buckskin Sam."

The Texan Ranger laughed, and turning to Juanita said pleasantly:

"Don't get blue, senorita, for all will come well with you, soon."

"Ah, yes, by paying the gold demanded; but what will not your fate be, senor?"

"Now do not worry, for I shall not, until the time comes to die."

"Go ahead, you miserable curs and do your worst as far as I am concerned, but do have man enough about you for the sake of the mother who bore you, to treat this lady with respect."

"She will not be treated badly; but you must both be blindfolded," and the man, with a silk scarf, securely bound the eyes of both Senorita Corsala and Buckskin Sam.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BEHIND IRON BARS.

BUCKSKIN SAM and the Senorita Corsala accepted their fate with perfect calmness, when they felt that there was no hope for them then.

They were blindfolded, their arms securely bound and each was made secure to the saddle.

Then their captors rode on with them, following one of the most devious trails that the Texan remembered to have ever tracked in his life.

The cool air upon his face told Buckskin Sam when night came on, for being securely blindfolded he could not tell light from darkness.

Then he felt his horse climbing with him, and after a ride of a couple hours one of the men said in a low tone:

"Here we are."

Then they halted, there was a call made to some one to open a door, a low conversation for a few minutes, and then the Texan knew that they had ridden into some inclosure.

He heard the hoofs of the horses ring on hard flagging, and there was an echo which told him they were within walls of some kind, or surrounded by cliffs.

They were soon after relieved of their bonds and told to dismount, but the bandages were still kept upon their eyes.

The Ranger felt sure that they had entered some structure, and he was being conducted along a corridor, from the echoing sound of his footfalls, when he said cheerily:

"We will have rest at least, senorita, and I hope something to eat."

"The senorita is not with you," said one of his guards.

"Where is she?"

"Safe, as you soon will be," and with the words he was suddenly given a hard shove that sent him running forward, and before he could turn there came the sound of clanking iron as a door was closed behind him.

He at once, having had the lariat that bound his arms loosened but not freed, began to struggle hard to release himself, and, after a severe struggle he succeeded.

Then as he tore the bandage from his eyes he heard the words:

"It will do you no good, senor, for you to have your arms free there, for you are in the Death Chamber, and only a spirit can escape from there."

Buckskin Sam's eyes were at first dazzled by a light shining in there, and it was a couple of moments, after having been blindfolded so long, before he could see distinctly.

Then he beheld his surroundings with a feeling akin to horror, for he saw that he was in an arched underground chamber.

It was a small place, longer than it was wide, and he felt cool air coming in from above, and glancing up saw a dark hole there.

In the chamber was a buffalo-skin for a bed, a stool and nothing else.

The entrance was through an iron door, one of bars, and through this shone the light and he beheld the man who had spoken to him standing there.

It was an evil face he saw, and he observed that he had changed keepers, for he was not one of the *vaqueros*, but a man in the garb of a padre.

"Well, senor, this is poor business for one of your cloth, putting me in here to die," said the Texan sternly.

"Blame your captors, not me, or the cloth, for the latter is innocent as I assume it under orders of my chief, not because I have a right to the garb of a padre, for I have not."

"So you are an impostor?"

"Yes, as most men are."

"Who is your chief?"

"We call him El Sol."

"Ah! you are one of the Robber Ranger band?"

"Exactly."

"And what is to be done with me?"

"I had orders to put you here, and when a man is sent to the Death Chamber it means that he is doomed."

"To-morrow the chief may change his mind, and have you shot, or hanged, instead of starving you to death—there is no telling what his fancy may be."

"Thanks for your interesting information."

"You are welcome; but now I must go, but I guess I'll see you in the morning if only to tell you what the chief has decided to do with you."

"Yes, come and see me, for I have taken a fancy to you and cannot see too much of you," and Buckskin Sam saw the man retreat with his lantern, halt at a solid iron door, and when it closed behind him all was darkness.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE STAR OF HOPE.

It was a moment to try the bravest soul, when the iron door closed in upon Buckskin Sam, leaving him alone in a rocky cell which the man who had placed him there had called the Death Chamber.

He stood for a moment in silence and then decided to lie down upon the buffalo-robe and think out his unfortunate situation and what it was best to do under the circumstances.

If he was left there to starve then he did not see anything could be done.

If the keeper, the man who was playing the part of a priest for fraudulent reasons, returned, he would spring upon him, and try conclusions then and there.

The fact that the man had admitted his guilt were convincing proof that he considered the prisoner safe beyond all escape.

Shuffling around in the darkness, until his feet touched the robe, Buckskin Sam lay down upon it, but felt that it already covered something.

He put out his hand and drawing down the robe gave a slight start, in spite of his nerve, as he placed it on a human skull.

He found then that the whole skeleton form was there, but, after running his hands over it for a moment he muttered to himself:

"He may have died here, but his skeleton was doctored afterward, for the bones are all strung together."

"Yes, it was put here for effect, but the effect is lost upon me, for I don't scare at the dead."

"It is not, however, a pleasant thought to feel that I may be the counterpart of this skeleton form before long—ah! what is that?"

"A light peering through the chink in the rock?"

He had dropped back upon the buffalo-robe, his head resting upon, his hands clasped behind it, and thus his eyes were bent upward, and then he had seen what he at first supposed was a glimmer of light.

But fixing his eyes upon it steadily it took a different shape, for he was looking through a small round hole in the rocky roof of the vault and twenty feet above him.

"I see the stars," he said in a low tone.

"Yes, the free air is not far away, and I shall lose no time in making a struggle to reach it."

"Fools! they over-reached themselves with all their cunning, and not searching me did not discover my trusty revolver and knife hidden in my boot tops."

"Then, too, they could not see how the lariat was any use to me, so left it here, too."

"Perhaps I may work my way to freedom after all."

"That is a small hole, but I am a small man."

"Yes, there is a grating across it, but I

shall not despair until I know I cannot go through that way."

He hunted for the lariat, took it up, and to one end fastened his knife.

Then he began to throw it up at the opening being careful that it would not drop back upon him.

Scores of throws resulted in a failure to catch upon the iron bar, as the knife striking against it proved it to be, but at last it did go up on one side and down upon the other.

By standing on the stool and lessening the drag upon the lariat, the knife's weight drew it down within his grasp.

Quickly releasing the knife he seized both ends of the lariat and went up hand over hand to the hole in the roof.

Hanging there with one hand he reconnoitered.

"It is small, but I can squeeze through."

"There is an iron grating across, two bars, but maybe they can be removed."

He made the lariat into a swing, and seated in it began to see about the bars.

He found that they were driven into holes in the rock upon either side, but he believed that by an effort of his great strength, he could bend them and force them out.

Of course to do this he must have something else to hang his swing upon.

Then he thought of the stool, and its legs were long enough to reach over the aperture.

So down the lariat he went, and finding the stool, quickly smashed it to pieces.

Taking two of the legs, he again climbed up, placed them over the top of the pole and found that they would remain firm.

Then he drew up the slack of his lariat and began to make him a secure swing, for he knew that it would be hard work bending the iron bars.

The swing made, and suspended upon the legs of the stool, he grasped one of the rods firmly, and made an effort to bend it.

The first attempt pleased him, for he found that it was slender enough to bend if he was strong enough, hampered as he was swinging in the air.

A second effort bent the iron upward several inches, and a third attempt forced it from the holes on either side, and he saw freedom staring him in the face.

CHAPTER L.

THE ESCAPE.

FREEDOM seemed to stare Buckskin Sam in the face, when he had bent one of the irons, and taken it out but was it only freedom from the Death Chamber to find he could not escape after all?

He knew how those old Missions were built, that they were as strong as prisons, were rambling and castle-like, yet he could see the stars above him, and he looked upon one that shone brightly down as a star of hope to him, for it had beckoned him the way to escape when he had dropped back upon the buffalo-robe, with a skeleton form for his only companion.

The second iron bar was harder to remove than the other, and one end could hardly be dragged out of its fastening.

But at last it yielded and the Texan was almost prostrated by the strain and felt like descending to the cell to rest.

But he dared not do so, dared not delay then, and placing his knees in the lariat swing he began to struggle to get through the opening.

He at last squeezed through, but muttered grimly:

"I'll never again grumble at being a small man, for had I been ever so little larger, I could never have made it."

He reached down, unfastened his lariat, coiled it about his waist, under the sash he always wore, stuck the revolver also in the sash and the knife, and with a leg of the stool in his hand turned and looked about him.

It was starlight, and he saw that mountains towered upon all sides of him.

The place where he stood was the rocky roof of the wing of an old Mission, and it overhung a canyon that seemed to be very deep, as he glanced over into the black depths.

Cautiously he moved about and soon found

that the old structure had been built upon a cliff, and under the shadow of one that overhung it, while upon all sides there seemed to be precipices.

He was sure of one thing and that was that he was on the roof of the old building, and must find his way off at a point where he could find the approach to it.

He remembered that the horses had seemed to climb hard in approaching the old Mission, and the trail was rugged, steep and dangerous, though being blindfolded he could not of course see his way.

Searching for a place where he could look over and not down into an abyss, he at last came to a rock turret, and peering over felt sure that he was just over the entrance to the Mission.

He tied his knife to his lariat and lowering it over, for he could not see how far below was a foundation, he heard it strike, and raising it he measured the distance.

"Twenty feet!"

"My lariat will double around this rock and both ends reach the ground."

He placed his lariat around one of the peaks of the turret, lowered the ends and then swung himself over.

Slowly down he went, hand under hand, until his feet touched a firm foundation.

There before him was the massive entrance to the Mission, the iron-studded doors.

From there the trail led down into the valley beyond a doubt.

"This is no place for me," he muttered, and drawing his lariat down after him he again coiled it about his waist and started down the steep trail leading from the Mission.

"I guess they keep their horses in there, or corral them in some valley near; but I can take no chances hunting for horseflesh now," he muttered.

Then down the trail he went at a swinging pace, his eyes and ears alert for danger.

Suddenly he stopped, for distinctly to his ears came the sound of voices.

He heard hoof-falls also, but with cliffs about him on all sides he could not tell from whence the sounds came.

If those he heard were coming upon his trail he could hasten on ahead, but if before him he would have to retreat to the Mission and there was no hiding-place that he had noticed all along the shelf of rock down which the trail ran.

Nearer and nearer came the voices, until suddenly it seemed that those he heard were directly over his head.

Glancing up, while he grasped his revolver, Buckskin Sam saw on a rocky shelf not twenty feet over his head, the forms of half a dozen horsemen, and it seemed that their trail led right down to where he stood, and from whence there was no escape.

CHAPTER LI.

OBTAINING INFORMATION.

BUCKSKIN SAM stood calmly at bay, determined to face the worst as it came to him.

"It's better than being in that dungeon if there are a dozen of them," he said dryly.

But, to his surprise and delight the men passed on, and as their noise died away in the distance he again went on his way.

He had gone but a short distance when he discovered how it was that he had heard and seen them.

They were upon a trail above the one he had been traveling and it had descended into the one he was then on a hundred yards beyond where he had seen them.

He was glad that they had had business down the valley, instead of at the Mission, as that would have brought them full upon him.

Hastening on at a trot he was not long in coming in sight of the horsemen, who were riding slowly on down the trail to the valley.

"They are too many to tackle, or I'd get me a horse," he muttered, and he hung back out of sight.

A mile below the men halted in the valley, and Buckskin Sam was glad to find that the nature of the ground enabled him to creep close up to where they were.

They had halted for a rest and supped evidently, for their horses were staked out and one of the number began to build a fire.

Seeing this Buckskin Sam crept to a rock overhanging the camp and not fifty feet away from them.

The fire was soon kindled and the party began to broil bacon, boil some coffee and toast crackers for their supper.

There were seven men all told and they had a pack-horse heavily laden.

"A more villainous set I never saw out of jail," muttered Buckskin Sam, and as the men settled down to supper he made himself more comfortable and waited to catch what was said.

He had not long to wait before one of them said in Spanish:

"Curses upon the pretended padres up at the retreat, for they put on too many airs."

"What is the matter with you, Pablo?" said another.

"Yes, you are always growling."

"What have the padres done to anger you?"

"Why they won't open up their old ranch at night, save for the captain himself."

"It's the chief's orders, Pablo, you know."

"I don't see why."

"Well, you know it would not do to open the gates to every one, even if they are playing padres."

"We have a great deal of booty there, and they protect it, for there is no one save our band, who do not believe the men there are real padres."

"Now the order is that they shall not open the gates at night to any one, save the captain."

"And that makes me wait here alone until daylight with the booty, when if I could get in I'd have a bed to sleep in and a good rest," grumbled Pablo.

"All right, those are the orders and you cannot go against them or blame the men up in the Mission."

"It is nearly midnight now, so you won't have to wait so very long, for you can go up at sunrise."

"And I'll do it, for I want a good breakfast, after the hard riding and worry we have done the past few days; but don't forget to tell the captain that all I said was true, about the ranch down the river, and that we got plenty of booty as I said we would."

"I'll tell him, Pablo, and you had better remain in the Mission until you hear from him."

"You bet I will, for I haven't forgot that Texan who swore he'd kill me the next time our trails crossed."

"You mean Texas Jack?"

"Yes, curse him."

"He bears a charmed life, for time and again I've lain to kill him and missed it."

"The last time he told me to get out of Texas and Mexico, too, or I'd have to climb a rope."

"I went, for somehow that Texan scares me, and it was then I took service as a *vaquero* at the ranch we robbed two nights ago."

"I knew we'd make a big haul, so came back and told the captain, and you were sent with me; but I'll not feel safe until I've got into the Mission with my booty."

"You'll be all right here, Pablo."

"I wish you were going to wait with me, for somehow I feel nervous at being back up here again."

"You see I've done so many things I ought to be hanged for I can't help feeling I may run upon Texas Jack again."

"Not in Mexico."

"Don't you fool yourself, for that man Texas Jack goes anywhere and everywhere, and there is another one like him."

"Who is that?"

"Buckskin Sam."

"Yes, they are dangerous men, and I tell you we ought to kill them, for if they get on the trail of the Robber Rangers they'll make it warm for us; but now, Pablo, we must go on to camp, and you get up to the Mission as soon as day dawns—you remember the countersign for this month, don't you?"

"It's 'Golden onzas,' isn't it?"

"Yes, and now we must be off," and six of the men mounted soon after and rode away, leaving Pablo and his pack-horse alone in the temporary camp.

CHAPTER LII.

A PRESENTIMENT OF EVIL.

"I don't feel just right to-night—maybe I'm not exactly well, for my nerves are shaky, and I've a presentiment that I should not have come back to the band."

So said Pablo aloud as he stood by the camp-fire watching his comrades ride away and disappear in the gloom down the valley.

He gazed after them for some minutes, then threw some more brush upon the fire, as though he liked darkness rather than light, and then sat down in the shadow of a rock near by.

His presentiment of evil was a true one, though he did not see the eyes of the Texan glancing upon him from the rock above, or hear the muttered words:

"Well, this is a picnic—a horse right at hand, with a pack-animal, booty and a prisoner all to order."

"I call this great luck even for a Texas Ranger."

"And an acquaintance of Jack's, too, and one who knows me."

"He must be treated to the best I've got."

There was a dry humor about Buckskin Sam which enabled him to see the situation in a comical light.

He drew back from the rock, retraced his way down to the trail and went on down into the valley.

Creeping along the base of the cliff to a position within a hundred feet of the camp-fire he halted.

There sat the man Pablo back in the shadow, his eyes growing heavy with sleep as he looked steadily into the bright blaze.

Buckskin Sam uncurled his lariat from about his waist, held it in one hand, and with his revolver ready to grasp on the instant, began to creep slowly toward the outlaw.

He had no wish to kill him without mercy, and he did not care to fire a shot then, as he was not sure of his surroundings.

He must get as near the man as possible, throw his lasso coils about him and then cover him with his revolver.

Nearer and nearer he crept until he was but fifteen feet away.

A sound of hard breathing told him that the outlaw had sunk to sleep, so he stepped nearer, arranged his lariat in a more secure coil, and suddenly cast it, giving a hard pull at the same time.

The coils caught over the arms of the outlaw, the hard pull dragged him down upon his face, and before he could rise to his feet Buckskin Sam had his foot upon him and his revolver pressed hard against his head, while he said, in a low, stern tone:

"I want you!"

"Don't make me kill you!"

The outlaw groaned, for awaked from sleep as he had been, he was dazed, frightened, bewildered.

Quickly and dexterously Buckskin Sam disarmed him and then bound him securely with his lariat.

"Who are you?" gasped the Mexican, the light from the fire being very dim.

"Did you ever hear of Texas Jack?"

"Caramba!"

"Well, I am not Texas Jack."

A muttered oath was the answer.

"You have heard of Buckskin Sam?"

"Madre de Dios! it is just as bad, you are Buckskin Sam."

"At your service, Senor Pablo."

"You know me?"

"Oh yes, and want your company."

"You will have to ride your pack-horse, while I take your saddle animal, but I guess we will get along all right."

"Now tell me which trail do I take to the Whirlpool Ford?"

"Right on up the valley."

"You are dodging the truth wildly, Senor Pablo, for if I went in that direction I would run upon a gang of your pards, and that is far from my intention."

"These two streams flow down hill, and not up, so this one in the valley flows down to the Rio Grande."

"Come, we must be upon our way."

"See here, pard, let us strike a bargain."

"What is it?"

"I'll pay you big money to let me go."

"Where is your money?"

"I've got it with me."

"All right, I'll keep you and the money with you."

"Now I must fit a gag into that mouth of yours for I will take no chances."

The man begged hard not to be gagged, but Buckskin Sam knew his danger and was throwing no chances of escape away by making mistakes.

So he fitted a gag into the man's mouth, then made him mount the pack-horse, which he lessened the load of as much as he could, and tying his feet and hands securely, he took Pablo's saddle-horse and led the way down the valley, holding on to the lariat of the other horse.

The presentiment of Pablo the outlaw, that evil would befall him, had come true.

CHAPTER LIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

WHEN Surgeon Powell moved away from the Buena Vista Hacienda, the home as well as the headquarters of Colonel Sandos, he was a little nettled that he had been given an escort to the river; but he had not gone very far before a party of Mexican *vaqueros* were met with, and as it was upon the open plain, escape from them would have been impossible had the surgeon scout been alone.

Now he saw that the colonel had shown wisdom, for the men were in an ugly mood, and only the presence of the Mexican cavalry escort prevented trouble.

When they reached the river, the Surgeon Scout thanked the officer kindly for his services, and rode at once into the river, just as dawn was approaching.

He crossed in safety, ascended the steep trail to the cliffs above, and at once sought the camp which he knew well, and where Buckskin Sam and Colonel Sandos sought refuge from the storm.

He had just turned into the little canyon when he drew rein suddenly, for there in the dim gray of the morning he saw a horseman.

He had not himself been seen, and he drew back in the shadow of a pine tree and waited.

A moment after a man advanced toward the horseman and began to busy himself about his saddle apparently.

"If that is not Buckskin Sam then it is his double," muttered the Surgeon Scout, as he watched the man by the side of the horseman.

Presently the horseman dismounted, and the scout saw that he was securely bound, and at once he ran forward, calling out:

"Ho, Sam, how are you?"

"Surgeon Powell!" cried the Ranger, taking his hand off his revolver, where it had instinctively fallen at the first sound of a voice.

"Yes, Sam, and glad to see you."

"But who is your friend?" and as he grasped the Texan's hand he nodded toward the man who stood near by.

"That is an outlaw I ran across up in the mountains, sir, for I am just now from Mexico, after a forced absence there of several days."

"Indeed! so am I; but I heard that you were in trouble, and right glad am I to see you well out of it."

"I have struck it rich in finding you here, Buckskin Sam, for I have a little work on hand for to-day that you will be the very man to help me in."

"I came here to camp for breakfast and a few hours' rest."

"Breakfast! Lordy, but I'm hungry and neither that fellow or myself have an ounce of food between us."

"I am well supplied, so neither of you shall suffer."

"Now let us look to the cattle and then we can have breakfast, after which we can talk matters over and get a couple of hours' rest."

The Surgeon Scout got his haversack of provisions out as he spoke, and built a fire while Buckskin Sam tied his prisoner to a tree and staked the horses out to feed.

Breakfast, of broiled bacon, cold roast beef, crackers and coffee was soon disposed of, the prisoner being given his share also.

Then he was made fast to a tree where he

could rest, and the surgeon and the Texan sat down for a talk together, the former remarking:

"Well, Sam, how did you escape?"

"First tell me how you knew they had me, Surgeon Powell?"

"Well, I got the information from one to whom we all owe lasting favors, for he turned me off a trail I was riding straight into an ambush, and sent me down by this ford."

"Then you were in Mexico, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I went to see the Ranchero King on a special mission for Colonel Elwood, and I had hopes of finding you somewhere, so I am in luck in having done so."

"How did you leave Jack, sir?"

"Improving slowly but surely."

"That is good news, sir; but you say you were informed by some one that you were riding into an ambush?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind telling me who?"

"Oh no, Sam, for we are in this game to play pards, win or lose."

"It was the outlaw captain."

"Buck Parker?"

"Yes."

"That man is a noble fellow if he is an outlaw."

"How was it, sir?"

"I'll tell you the whole story, Sam, but before I do, I should like to ask you what you thought of Sergeant Nick Norton?"

"He is a man I like sincerely, sir, and brave as a lion, for I have been in several engagements in which I have acted as scout for the troop he belonged to."

"Would you think he was a man to turn road-agent?"

"I'd give the lie to the man who told me Nick Norton would do a dishonorable act, Surgeon Powell."

"Well, Sam, the reason I went to see the Ranchero King, was on account of his being held up on the trail, after leaving the fort, and gold demanded of him, and Sergeant Norton was the man."

"No, no, sir, some one masquerading as Norton, not the sergeant himself," eagerly said Buckskin Sam.

"Well, Sam, the sergeant was killed, and the Ranchero King makes this charge against him."

"It is false!" almost shouted Buckskin Sam.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE TWO PLOTTERS.

SURGEON POWELL saw that Buckskin Sam was very much in earnest, in his denial of the crime charged to Sergeant Norton by the Ranchero King.

But in his quiet way he responded:

"No, Sam, no one masqueraded as the sergeant, for I was the first on the scene, Lieutenant Dick Turpin being with me, and we found the body of Norton just where the Ranchero King said in his note to Colonel Elwood that it would be."

"I cannot understand it, sir."

"No more could I, Sam, and that is just why I went to Del Monte Hacienda to visit the Ranchero King."

"You saw him there, sir?"

"Yes, and I do not know any one I am more glad to meet than you."

"Thank you, sir."

"I hoped to run across you somewhere, as I knew you had crossed with Colonel Sandos, and see what you could make out of the signs I picked up, for I went on the belief that the sergeant had not turned highwayman."

"And I still say, sir, there is some mistake."

"Well, we will see what we can make out of it, and I wish you to listen to each point I make and then see what your opinion is."

"I will, sir."

Then Surgeon Powell told the story of the Ranchero King's leaving the fort though still weak from the effects of his wound, and how, a couple of hours or so after, the horse of Sergeant Norton came in with the Ranchero King's note pinned to the saddle.

With such a charge against an American sergeant, Colonel Elwood had wished to have the verbal testimony of Don Marlo Fuentes,

and hence he, the surgeon, had gone to the hacienda to request his presence at Fort Blanco, and a day had been set for his coming.

Not a word did the Surgeon Scout omit, not a discovery that he had made did he fail to make known, and the result was that Buckskin Sam got all the story up to the time of their meeting in the camp a short while before.

The Texan listened with deepest attention, and at last said:

"I am not yet convinced that Sergeant Norton did what the Ranchero King charged him with, Surgeon Powell."

"That third person, whom you called the Mysterious Horseman, could tell much of the affair I am sure, if he arrived before the sergeant died, for Don Marlo rode away leaving the sergeant dead, while, according to your account he did not die for an hour or two afterward, so that this man saw him alive."

"It is plain, therefore, that we must find this Mysterious Horseman, and that done we will know the truth."

"Such has been my theory, Buckskin Sam; but now, what have you been doing to get into the trouble you did, and how did you manage to escape?"

"I will tell you the story, sir," and this Buckskin Sam did, the surgeon deeply interested in all that he heard.

Then he said:

"Now, Sam, we are in this game to win, and I wish to see it to the end."

"Properly speaking, it is your province to ferret this out, but I am with you as a pard, from the interest I feel in it, and we will yet solve the mystery of the sergeant's death, and also do all we can to run to earth this lawless band of Robber Rangers."

"Count on me unto death, doctor," eagerly said Buckskin Sam.

"I know that, Sam."

"But now we will have time to take a couple of hours' rest, and both of us need it, and then we will ride to Panther Pass and find those fellows who are in ambush for me, so as not to disappoint them."

"Yes, sir, it would be cruel to disappoint them."

"This done, we must return to this camp, for Colonel Sandos is to meet me here tonight and give me any news he may have discovered."

"And we'll have something to tell him, sir."

"But, I fear, nothing about the Senorita Corsala?"

"Well, no, doctor; but I guess she's safe, and she will not be treated badly, I am sure, only it must cause her to suffer from her being held a prisoner."

"Well, Sam, now to rest, and then to take the trail of those who wish to ambush me" and the two were soon sleeping soundly

CHAPTER LV.

AT PANTHER PASS.

As it would be risky to leave Pablo and his valuable pack-horse alone in the camp, it was decided that the pack-saddle with the booty should be hidden and the prisoner be made to go along.

He was mounted on a saddle made of a blanket, and with the pack hidden safely away, the two started with their prisoner.

They rode rapidly for some miles, then, upon reaching the trail which Surgeon Powell would have taken, had he returned by the way he went, they concluded to take the ambishers in the rear and to arrange a plan to catch the outlaws in their murderous act.

"I'll tell you, Sam, what I will do, so we can get the fellows between us."

"Yes, doctor."

"We can rig up a fake man in my uniform, tie it in my saddle, and I will start my horse into Panther Pass about the time I think you have gotten into position at the other end."

"The very thing, doctor."

"I can follow on foot close behind my horse, and when they fire upon the fake, it will be the signal for us to show ourselves."

"We will do it with a vengeance too, sir; but now to put this man Pablo in a safe place."

"I will take him with me, leaving him only when we get near the pass, and fastening his horse so that he cannot get away."

"All right, sir, I am ready when you are."

The two then went to work to make a fake man, using the doctor's uniform coat and hat, and blankets, which with the aid of high boots and a lariat made a form that it would be hard to tell at a short distance off as not being real.

Taking his trail to his position, Buckskin Sam moved rapidly away then, while Surgeon Powell went at a slower pace to his place of action.

Reaching it, the fake form was then fastened into the saddle with the frame of sticks made for it, and the reins of the bridle were made fast to the horn to prevent the horse from cropping grass as he went along.

The next move was to put the prisoner in a safe place, and this done, in his shirt sleeves and wearing moccasins to replace his boots, Surgeon Powell started his horse off with the decoy on his back.

The well trained animal went along as though he understood just what was expected of him, and the form in the saddle looked exactly as though the officer was asleep, it swaying from side to side as a sleeping man does when riding.

The Panther Pass was a narrow canyon, cutting through a range of hills, and it was not over half a mile in length.

The outlaw captain had told Surgeon Powell that the men in ambush were to be near the center, where there was an excellent hiding-place for them and their horses.

The Surgeon Scout saw that there was a trail of four horses going into the pass, from the river direction, and they had not returned.

He was not two hundred yards behind his horse when he entered the pass, and he hastened to catch up and be near when the moment had arrived for action.

As the surgeon neared the center of Panther Pass he heard the report of rifles break the stillness in the canyon ahead.

The echoes caused the shots to sound as though half a hundred rifles had been discharged, and Frank Powell ran like a deer toward the scene, and he was a man of remarkable speed afoot.

Ere he came into view of the scene of ambush he heard the clear voice of Buckskin Sam shout out:

"Hands up, you cowards, or I fire!"

The three men in ambush had fired together upon the fake form in the saddle, and their bullets had gone true, for they tore through the uniform coat and hat, showing that each one would have been fatal had it been the Surgeon Scout instead of a mummy.

The horse had wheeled at the fire and dashed back toward his master, while, amazed that their fire did not kill their intended victim, the men dashed out of cover toward their horses to give chase.

"He is hit hard, but we must follow him," cried one of the men in Spanish.

But just as he uttered the words came the command of Buckskin Sam for them to raise their hands above their heads.

To catch his frightened horse as he came toward him, detained the Surgeon Scout for a minute, and then he had dismounted the fake from the saddle, sprung up himself and dashed on toward the scene, where now shots were rattling fast, for the men, hearing the answering shout of Doctor Powell had felt that they were hemmed in and had turned at bay.

CHAPTER LVI.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE Surgeon Scout dashed upon the scene in Panther Pass in the very second of time to be of service, for though one of the three outlaws had fallen dead at the fire of Buckskin Sam the other two had returned his shots, and the horse of the Ranger fell heavily as he was charging up to close quarters.

Nimble as was Buckskin Sam his horse had fallen so quickly, having been shot through the brain, that he could not catch upon his feet, and he dropped on his knees and was forced to drop his weapon to save himself from a severe fall.

As he did so one of the outlaws ran toward him, placed his rifle at a level, but

never pulled trigger, for at that moment the Surgeon Scout made one of the best shots of his life and the man's head was shattered by a bullet.

Seeing the fate of his two companions, the third Mexican decided to obey the first command of Buckskin Sam, and he not only held his hands above his head, but he threw aside his weapons and dropped upon his knees to make his surrender more apparent.

Buckskin Sam had risen to his feet, somewhat shaken up by his fall, but he did not fire upon the man who thus appealed for mercy, while Surgeon Powell dashed up and covered him with his revolver while he called out:

"Bind him, Sam, and the game is ours."

It took Buckskin Sam just one minute to bind the prisoner, and he said:

"I would have been like those two fellows, doctor, if it had not been for you."

"I brought you into the scrape, Sam, so it was only right I should help you out; but they killed your horse, though they have their animals near, so we can soon be on our way back to the camp."

"After we have buried these dead men, doctor, for when a man dies the living owe him the duty of burial, no matter what he may have been."

"That is so, Sam, and we will bury those two," and turning to the prisoner, who stood white-faced and trembling near, he continued:

"Now, my man, what was your motive in lying in ambush here to kill me?"

"Oh, señor, we are honest Mexican *vaqueros*, and we were attacked by the officer, who would have killed us, only we fired on him and his horse ran away, but we suppose he is dead."

Buckskin Sam looked at Major Powell and the two broke forth into a peal of hearty laughter, to the great amazement of the Mexican, who said:

"My heart is sad for my comrades."

"I can see nothing to laugh at in death."

"You immortal liar, we are laughing at you."

"Why that is the officer you shot at as you supposed—where is our fake, doctor?"

Surgeon Powell rode rapidly back around a bend of the pass and in a moment returned bearing the fake in uniform.

The man's face paled and flushed as he saw how he and his comrades had been deceived, and he remained silent while Surgeon Powell pulled the dummy to pieces and pointed to the holes in the uniform coat and a third in the hat.

"You may be lucky not to be killed with your pards, but I doubt it. As you will most likely be hanged."

"But as you would doubtless like to do a good act by your dead companions, just set to work digging a grave for them."

"Yes, and you guard him while at work, Sam, and I will ride back and bring up the other prisoner, and watch them closely to see if they do not recognize each other."

The latter part of his sentence Surgeon Powell whispered to Buckskin Sam and then rode away, while the prisoner was put to work digging a grave for the two who had fallen.

The doctor found the prisoner bound and gagged as he had left him, but removed the gag before he reached the spot where the other outlaw was digging the grave.

As the two Mexicans came face to face with each other the surgeon and Texan had their eyes riveted upon them; and, slyly given as was their recognition, it was seen by both of the Americans.

"You know each other I suppose, Pablo?" said Buckskin Sam.

"No señor, I never saw that man before, but there is a feeling akin between us as he, like myself, is in trouble."

"Do you recognize these two dead men?"

"No, señor."

"You are a good running mate with your pard there as a liar; but get down and help him dig that grave for your two comrades, for we are in a hurry," said Buckskin Sam.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE MEETING IN CAMP.

The grave was dug by the two Mexicans, and large enough for both of the dead men, who, after Buckskin Sam had searched

them, were laid away to rest after their evil lives, Pablo, in spite of his villainy, muttering a prayer over them, and making the sign of the Cross in the soft earth of the grave.

The horses of the outlaws had been brought up, and were found to be very fine animals, so Texas Jack's saddle and bridle were quickly transferred to one, and Pablo, who had ridden the pack-animal, was given another of the outlaws' horses to ride.

When all was in readiness for the ride, they mounted, and rode rapidly away upon the trail back to the river, anxious to arrive by sunset, as Surgeon Powell did not care to miss Colonel Sandos, who he felt sure would come as he had promised to do.

The pack was taken up on the way and half an hour before sunset they reached the camp.

The prisoners were secured, the horses staked out, and while Buckskin Sam prepared supper, Surgeon Powell ascended to the cliff and turned his glass upon the trail upon the other side.

"He is coming, Sam, but he is not alone."

"Who is with him, sir?" called back Buckskin Sam.

"He has a party of his Lancers as an escort, and he is right, for it is becoming more and more dangerous to travel the river-trails on either side now."

"I will go down to the shore and meet him."

This Surgeon Powell did, meeting Colonel Sandos just as he rode out of the river alone, for he had left his escort in camp on the other shore.

"Well, Señor Powell, I have news for you!" called out Colonel Sandos.

"Yes, colonel."

"The Señorita Corsala left her home with Buckskin Sam and an escort of *vaqueros*, and she has not returned to her ranch, but word was sent by her that she had gone across to visit the Señorita Elwood at Fort Blanco, so you see she was not taken prisoner with Buckskin Sam as you were informed."

"This word was sent to relieve her mother's mind, señor, should she remain away several days?"

"Yes, doubtless, Doctor Powell."

"The word was sent not by the Señorita Corsala, Colonel Sandos, but by the one who holds her prisoner."

"Can this be true, señor?"

"Yes, sir, as you will soon know, for I have a surprise for you, Colonel Sandos."

"What is it, señor?"

"The fellow-prisoner of the Señorita Corsala is in camp with me, colonel."

"What! can you mean it, that it is Buckskin Sam?"

"Yes, señor, he escaped from the outlaws and brought over a prisoner with him, and to-day he killed two men who were lying in wait for me, and the third is also our prisoner—but here we are in camp, and there is Buckskin Sam now and you will soon know all, and can tell us if you have any news of the young officer, Lieutenant Leon Rebello."

As the surgeon spoke he walked up to the camp-fire, Colonel Sandos following on foot, and leading his horse, for he had dismounted upon meeting Surgeon Frank Powell.

The colonel and the Texan Ranger warmly clasped hands, and the former said:

"I am sorry, Señor Hall, that through my sending you to the Corsala Hacienda you got into trouble."

"Do not mention it, Colonel Sandos, for I am glad of it, as, being taken prisoner, for Surgeon Powell told me you knew of the circumstances, I made discoveries which I could not otherwise have found out."

"But what of poor Señorita Corsala, who seems marked for misfortune of late?"

"I hardly know what to answer, sir."

"We were both blindfolded by our captors, who were men from her ranch, and I supposed that she was taken with me to the retreat from which I escaped."

"If she was not, I am at a loss to find out where she was taken."

"She must be rescued, Buckskin Sam," sternly said Colonel Sandos.

"Yes, sir, by all means, but when she is a death-blow must be struck at the Robber Rangers, one they will never recover from."

"The señorita may be inconvenienced, is doubtless far from happy; but she is safe

and will suffer no harm, so we will have time to arrange our plans to strike with success, and I feel that it can be done, only there is a link missing in the chain of evidence yet, and that link we must find; but you are in time for supper, and may recognize two prisoners the surgeon and I have in our camp."

CHAPTER LVIII.

PREPARING TO STRIKE.

THE two prisoners hung their heads as they were brought before Colonel Sandos, but he said as he looked intently at them:

"This man I know."

"His name is Pablo, and he should have been hanged long ago."

"He was one of the *vaqueros* of the Del Monte Ranch, but I learned had fled from the country, yet it seems he has returned for some reason."

"To be hanged," muttered Buckskin Sam, but the low words of the Texan caught the ears of the Mexican and his face paled.

"This man," and Colonel Sandos turned to the other prisoner, "is also one of the Ranchero King's cowboys, for he once brought me a note from Don Marlo, I remember."

"How was it that he became your prisoner, Surgeon Powell?"

"It was a case of the biter being bitten, señor, for he went with two others to Panther Pass to ambush me, and with Buckskin Sam's aid we caught him, and his two comrades lost their lives."

"This was done on Texas soil, señor?"

"Yes, Colonel Sandos, it was."

"And they were subjects of Mexico?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so."

"I'm an American, so you cannot claim me, Colonel Sandos," said the prisoner eagerly.

"Ah! is that so that you are an American?"

"Yes, I am."

"All right. Doctor Powell, I will have no claim on this man, so you will have to try him at Fort Blanco."

"And that means hanging," muttered Buckskin Sam, at which the Mexican, hoping for more favor from his own people than from Americans, hastened to say:

"I was joking, for I'm a Mexican, señor, and I demand your protection, Señor Colonel Sandos."

"My jurisdiction does not extend beyond the Rio Grande, my man, and, as you came across the river to commit crime, you will have to suffer according to the American laws."

The Mexican felt that he had made a mistake in saying anything as to nationality and gazed hopelessly at Colonel Sandos.

Supper was soon served, the Mexican colonel enjoying the meal with Surgeon Powell and Buckskin Sam, and afterward the three walked out on the cliff overlooking the river to discuss the situation as it then was, and try to find some plan for the rescue of the Señorita Corsala.

They talked the whole matter over, the letter of the Ranchero King regarding the killing of the sergeant, the visit of Buckskin Sam and the Señorita Corsala to Hacienda Del Monte, Surgeon Powell's going there, and the capture of the Texan and the Mexican maiden, with the warning that the Surgeon Scout had had of the ambush prepared for him.

The escape of Buckskin Sam from the old Mission, his capture of Pablo, and then the turning of the tables upon the three men in ambush, were all discussed.

But, let them go over the whole field as they might, and from different stand-points, the conversation would invariably come back to what Buckskin Sam called "the missing link of evidence," the Mysterious Horseman.

Colonel Sandos did not know just how to consider his mysterious appearance on the scene, and why he had not in some way made his knowledge of the killing of the sergeant known, unless he was one who had to keep in hiding himself from prudential reasons.

When the question came up as to the articles the Surgeon Scout had purchased from Marco Aquero, the Dandy *Vaquero*, Colonel Sandos had nothing to say.

He had ascertained that young Lieutenant Rebello had been last seen on the Rio Grande, wearing the dress of a *vaquero*, and he had said to a friend confidentially that he would have to turn Robber Ranger himself to hunt down the outlaws, as he intended to do.

"Now, that young Rebello carried out this intention there is no doubt in my mind, and he was the one who was killed by some man unknown, as the *vaquero*, Marco Aquero, reported to the Ranchero King," said the colonel.

"I leave the things in your possession, Colonel Sandos, for the father of the young officer, for I purchased them hoping that they might prove a clue in some way."

"I will myself return you the money you paid out, Surgeon Powell, for the general will gladly pay it back to me for these souvenirs of his son, of whom he held such bright anticipations; but he will be most anxious to hunt down this slayer of his boy."

"True, colonel, but nothing must be yet told of the circumstance of the killing of young Rebello, until Buckskin Sam and I have further tracked down those whose trails we are now on, and get ready to strike."

"Yes, I understand that, senor, and will be governed accordingly, for I am anxious to lend you all the aid in my power, for I am sure you are on the right track."

"As for the news of the Senorita Corsala, her mother feels no anxiety regarding her, as she is supposed to be visiting at Blanco."

So the three talked together, plotting and planning, until a late hour, when Colonel Sandos started upon his return to his hacienda, while Buckskin Sam and Surgeon Powell decided that the former should still remain on the trail, while the latter took the prisoners to the fort and again returned to his aid.

CHAPTER LIX

ON A PERILOUS TRAIL.

THE Surgeon Scout and Buckskin Sam obtained a couple of hours' sleep, and then a start was made for the fort, so as to arrive there before breakfast.

The Texan accompanied the surgeon and his prisoners for a mile or so on the trail, then branching off for the ford above, where the surgeon had crossed in following the tracks of the Mysterious Horseman whose identity was yet shadowed in mystery.

The Surgeon Scout continued on with the two prisoners and the pack-horse with the booty which Buckskin Sam had recovered with the capture of the man Pablo.

The soldiers and all gazed curiously at the Surgeon Scout as he rode into the fort, but, nodding to an officer here and there and returning a salute from a soldier, he rode straight to the headquarters of Colonel Elwood who was pacing to and fro in the open air enjoying his after breakfast cigar.

"Well, Surgeon Powell, you are back again I am glad to see, and it looks very much as though you had been on a raid into Mexico," said the colonel with a smile as he met the returned officer and warmly grasped his hand.

"Yes, sir, I may say that I have been on a raid," and Surgeon Powell followed the colonel into his quarters, leaving the two prisoners and the pack-horse under a guard.

"Outlaws of course?" said the colonel when the two were seated.

"Yes, sir, and of the very worst type, for one is the man Texas Jack drove out of the country, but who returned to continue his evil life again, and the other is a remnant of a trio who lay in ambush for me, sir.

"They are conjointly Buckskin Sam's and mine, and the pack-horse carries the booty unknown, but supposed to be valuable, as it was taken from a Texan Ranch by Mexican raiders, the man Pablo having led the party to secure it."

"Then you have seen Buckskin Sam?"

"Yes, sir, I left him an hour before dawn this morning; but to explain I would like to make my report of all as events happened."

"Take your own way and time, Powell," was the answer, and the colonel then listened to the interesting story which the Surgeon Scout had to tell of his expedition and meeting with Colonel Sandos and Buckskin Sam.

When the narrative was finished, the colonel who had been most deeply interested said:

"Well, Powell, you are certainly the man to send on a secret expedition in Borderland, for you have done splendidly, and I congratulate you."

"Now, I will send those two prisoners to the lock-up, and then we can take a look over the contents of the pack, and have the adjutant take an inventory of what is there, as they must be returned to the owners if possible."

This was done, and the pack was found to contain valuable silverware, jewelry, laces, silks and other articles of value, all taken from the ranch of a wealthy Mexican exile who was living on a ranch in Texas, and who was personally known to Colonel Sandos.

As Surgeon Powell was anxious to return as quickly as possible and join Buckskin Sam, he made all his arrangements for starting just after nightfall, and he was to take a well-supplied pack-horse along, for the two had determined to shadow the Mysterious Horseman and also to ferret out all they could regarding the retreats and movements of the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande.

To his great delight Surgeon Powell found Texas Jack much improved.

His fever had left him, and with it delirium had gone and the scout's brain was clear once more.

"I'm all right, doctor, but I feel as though I'd had a knock-out from a grizzly, for I am as weak as a child," said Texas Jack when Frank Powell visited him.

"Yes, you are all right, Jack, but weak, and it will be days before you begin to feel like your old self again."

"Do not worry, for Buckskin Sam is doing wonders in your place, and I am aiding him, so you may have the satisfaction of being avenged for what you have suffered."

"But are you well enough to answer me a question?"

"Certainly, Doctor Powell."

"You like the Ranchero King, I believe?"

"I like him and I don't, sir."

"Do you trust him?"

"I feel that there is something wrong at the bottom of the mysterious life he leads."

"So I think, and I believe it will not be long before that mystery is solved, Jack."

"But now I must be off."

Again visiting the headquarters, Surgeon Powell was invited to dine with the colonel, and so met Delle De Silva who was dining with Estelle, and the young ladies asked him many questions regarding his visit to the Ranchero King, while Estelle's face flushed as he said quietly:

"I also visited Colonel Sandos, and I prefer his ranch to Del Monte Hacienda, but they are within visiting distance, Miss De Silva."

"I'm glad to know that, for I have determined to lay siege to the heart of that mysterious man from Mexico, the Ranchero King, and if I miss his heart, I will be within calling distance of you, Estelle, at Buena Vista Hacienda."

"Tell me all about the hacienda of Don Mysterious, Doctor Powell, for I am most deeply interested."

Surgeon Powell gave a full description of both haciendas, and their surroundings, and when after night had fallen Delle and Estelle saw him ride out of the fort alone, leading his pack-horse, and they knew his perilous mission, Miss De Silva said:

"Estelle, what a pity it is that our army has not more officers in it like that splendid fellow Frank Powell."

"Yes, for he is certainly a perfect type of a courtly gentleman and daring soldier," answered Estelle.

CHAPTER LX.

A VISITOR TO DEL MONTE HACIENDA.

THE Ranchero King seemed a little more used up by his wound than he cared to admit even to himself, and so lolled about the hacienda in a moody way after the departure of Surgeon Frank Powell from his home.

He had, for him, been overwhelmed with visitors, in the coming of Buckskin Sam, Senorita Corsala and Surgeon Powell, and all so close together.

He was therefore a little surprised a couple of days after to have his servant announce that there was a visitor to see him.

"What, another?" he growled.

"Yes, senor."

"Who is he?"

"A stranger, senor."

"Where is he?"

"At the outer gate, senor, for he was not admitted until your pleasure was known."

"Show him in then."

A few moments after a man entered of tall, fine physique, clad in buckskin, with top-boots and slouch hat, and wearing a belt of arms about his waist.

"Welcome, senor, and be seated."

"You are an American, but I suppose you speak Spanish, as you are in Mexico?" and the Ranchero King gazed upon the heavily bearded face and tall form with secret admiration of the striking appearance of the stranger.

"I speak Spanish, Don Marlo Fuentes, though indifferently; but I have come here, senor, to ask you regarding one I have been anxious to find for years, and whom I have tracked from place to place."

"Who is it that you would find, senor?"

"His name is Nicholas Norton, and he is an American."

The Ranchero King did not change color as he heard the name, but said simply:

"What was Nicholas Norton to you, senor?"

"My twin brother, senor."

"Ah! I do note a resemblance now, especially in your form and bearing."

"Yes, we are said to be much alike."

"Well, Mr. Norton, for I suppose that is your name, I have bad news for you."

"Ah! senor, you mean that you cannot tell me where my brother is?"

"Yes, I can tell you, senor."

"I beg you to do so then, senor."

"Your brother is dead, Senor Norton."

"Dead!"

He started as he uttered the word and passed his hand over his face.

"Yes, he died very lately, only a few days ago."

"Was he here, senor?"

"No, he had left my employ some years ago."

"Then he had been in your employ, senor?"

"Yes."

"I beg you to tell me of him."

"I met him one night in the City of Mexico, where, as an American, he was set upon by some roughs."

"I took his part, found him a bright young fellow and so brought him to my hacienda with me and made him secretary and in fact manager."

"And he died here, senor?"

"No."

"Where did he die?"

"In Texas."

"Only a few days ago, you said?"

"Yes."

"How did he die, senor?"

"He was killed!"

"Poor Nick!"

"Pardon me, senor, if I pain you, but I must tell you the truth, and that your brother was unworthy of your sympathy."

"My brother was unworthy of my sympathy, senor?"

"So I am compelled to make known to you."

"I beg you to tell me what your strange words mean, senor."

"I will do so, with regret however."

"Your brother I trusted most thoroughly, and he had control of my books of the ranch, my money and all."

"Going to the City of Mexico I left him in charge of all; but I returned to find a letter from him saying that news had come from his home, and he intended starting at once for Texas."

"He wrote me that all was left as he had found it, and he drew only the money due him."

"Instead I found that he had robbed me of several thousand *pesos*, of silver and jewelry, while he fitted himself out from my wardrobe, stables, armory and supplies."

"I pocketed my loss and never saw him again until I met him in Texas several days ago wearing the uniform of a sergeant in the United States Army."

"Ah, senor, my brother did not commit theft, no matter what evidence of his guilt you had against him."

"My dear senor, your brother did betray my trust in him, did rob me and then fled, for he knew it would not be well for me to catch him."

"You would have killed him then?"

"I certainly would have done so, senor."

"He was killed you say?"

"Yes."

"Several days ago?"

"Yes."

"In Texas."

"Yes."

"Did you kill him, senor?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER LXI.

A BROTHER'S STORY.

THE cool manner of the Ranchero King in answering in the affirmative the questions of the brother of the man he had killed, did not disconcert his visitor in the least, for he asked in an unmoved tone:

"Why did you kill my brother, Don Marlo Fuentes?"

"You wish to hear the whole truth, senor?"

"I do."

"I had forgotten his very existence even, until, when returning from Fort Blanco several days ago, I came upon a horseman awaiting on the trail.

He was in uniform, wore a sergeant's stripes and I knew that he was a soldier of the United States Army.

"I did not recognize him until he made himself known, and his manner of doing so was by holding me up for ten thousand dollars."

"A large sum."

"Yes, and one I would not pay and so told him.

"Then he threatened to make charges against me to Colonel Elwood, and of course, recalling how I had been wronged by him in the past, and regarding him as no more than a road-agent, it came to a question of life or death between us and I killed him, being a trifle quicker in the use of my weapon, for I have had a great deal of experience, senor, yes, a great deal."

"So I have heard, senor; but let me ask you if there was not a suspicion in your mind that some one else might have robbed you and, as my brother was going away, the crime was cast upon him?"

"No, I held no such idea, and there was no one to rob me save your brother."

"I am sorry that you deemed him guilty, senor, for—"

"Did he not waylay me upon the trail, hold me up and demand gold of me?"

"So you said, senor."

"Then why deem him not guilty of robbing me when he left me as he did?"

"If you will allow me, senor, I will tell you why I do not believe him guilty."

"Well, senor?"

"As I said, we were twin brothers, and we were most devoted to each other from earliest boyhood."

"I was a trifle wild, he the steady one, and I got into several serious scrapes from my love of mischief and sport."

"One night there was a murder committed in our town, and a robbery, and to my horror they came to our home after me as the guilty one."

"They seemed to have every proof of my guilt, but my brother told them that I was not at home, and he knew that I had gone away a couple of days before, yet he feared that I was guilty."

"The officer of the law then said that either my brother or I had committed the crime, and there were many witnesses to swear it upon one of us, as we were both so much alike."

"Then, senor, my brother showed his regard for me, for he told the officer to take him to prison."

"He did so, and he was tried for robbing a bank and the murder of the watchman, found guilty and sentenced to be hanged."

"And where were you, senor?"

"I had gone out sailing one afternoon alone in a little boat, a storm blew me out to sea, and several days after I was picked up a couple of hundred miles off shore by a clipper ship bound around the Horn to China."

"It was more than a year before I again set foot in the United States and learned what had happened."

"Your brother was not hanged, senor?"

"No, he felt that I was guilty, as I could not be found, and knowing that he was innocent and not wishing naturally to die on the gallows, he made his escape from prison a few days before the time appointed for his execution, and became a wanderer."

"I returned and hearing all, and seeing how my parents had been crushed under the blow of my brother's supposed crime and my mysterious disappearance, I decided to ferret out the mystery of that murder, for I never believed Nick guilty."

"I was rich, and had ample leisure, and gold and hard work accomplish much, senor, as I discovered."

"With what result?"

"That I found the real robber and murderer and saw him hanged two years after I started upon my work of hunting him down."

"His confession saved my brother, and all knew that he had sacrificed himself because he deemed me guilty."

"Then I set out to look my brother up, my parents having both passed away."

"I advertised in the papers, telling the story as it was, hoping to catch his eye, and I suppose it was that he saw, and no letter that was the cause of his leaving your employ."

"I know that he wrote home soon after from Texas, but the letters were returned to him, for our parents were dead and I was wandering about in search of him."

"That must have discouraged him and caused him to enter the army, as he did."

"But I kept up my search and at last got track of him, for he had never changed his name, and so I trailed him to your ranch, senor, alas! to find out that I came too late."

"That is why, senor, that I say my brother never robbed you, was never guilty of a mean action."

"That is your opinion, and I have mine," coldly replied the Ranchero King.

CHAPTER LXII.

A HALT ON THE TRAIL.

THE visitor to the Ranchero King arose to take his leave when Don Marlo said courteously:

"You are not going, senor?"

"Yes, Don Marlo, I will go on my way."

"Which way do you take?"

"To Fort Blanco to see Colonel Elwood and learn what I can about my brother's life as a soldier."

"But you will surely remain my guest all night at least?"

"No, senor, thank you, I will go."

"But it is a long trail to the fort, you have to cross the river, you know, and dangers beset you."

"I have followed many a lone and dangerous trail, senor."

"I will send an escort with you."

"Thank you, no; I can find my way."

"But the danger, senor."

"I will chance that."

In vain did the Don urge; the visitor was determined to go alone and he did so.

He was well mounted, and looked like one prepared for a long journey, for he had his blankets and supplies with him.

The Don half held out his hand in parting, but the visitor appeared not to see it, and simply bade him good-evening, and rode away.

He quickened his pace once he reached the timber that shut him out from a view of the hacienda, and for several miles pressed rapidly along.

At last he came to a ridge, the summit of which was rugged and heavily timbered.

Here he halted, staked his horse out some rods from the trail where there was good feeding, and then coolly sat down under cover where he could look back over the trail he had come for a couple of miles.

After sitting there a while he took a field glass that hung from his belt and turned it upon the trail.

"Just as I expected—I am followed," he said quietly.

Again he looked through his glass and muttered:

"There are three of them."

"Well, I shall stand at bay, for I will not be driven."

"I shall halt them, demand their business, and if they want me they must take me," and he looked like one who was not to be driven.

Nearer and nearer came the three horsemen, and they were riding very rapidly.

They were Mexicans, the glass revealed, and rode like just what they were, *vaqueros*.

The man at bay quietly looked to his weapons, his repeating-rifle and revolvers, and took up the best position he could find, behind a tree that had fallen along the top of the ridge, and which formed, with the rocks in front of it, a fine breastwork.

Up the hill came the horsemen at a gallop, and when they were near the ridge suddenly the voice of the man at bay cried in a voice that was loud and clear as a trumpet:

"Halt, senors!"

The three *vaqueros* stopped as one man, reining their horses back upon their haunches in alarm.

"Why do you follow my trail, senors?" called out the American.

"Are you the Senor Norton?" asked one of the men.

"I am."

"The Don Marlo requests that you return to the hacienda to see him upon an important matter."

"Say that I am well on my way to the fort and cannot return."

"He says that you must return, senor."

"I will not."

"Our orders are to fetch you back."

"You had better get reinforcements then, for my mind is made up not to go and three of you are not sufficient to take me."

"We have more, for yonder they come."

Looking over the trail Norton saw that the man was right, for half a dozen horsemen were coming on at a gallop.

"I did not expect so large a force, and it would have been better for me have pressed on until nightfall and eluded them."

"It is too late now and I must fight, I suppose."

The three Mexicans had meanwhile consulted together.

If the American was to go back they wished the credit of taking him before their comrades came up, and so one of them called out loudly:

"We want you, senor, and we are going to take you."

"I warn you back, for I will stand no nonsense."

"Come!" and with the word the three men sprung forward up the steep hill at a run.

CHAPTER LXIII.

JUST IN TIME.

THE man at bay raised his rifle very deliberately, like one who was in no hurry to fire, and had no fear of the result if forced to do so.

He took quick aim and pulled trigger with the remark:

"I'll dismount them first."

The shot brought down a horse and his rider fell heavily.

A second shot brought down another horse, and the rider was pinned under his weight.

The third man slipped quickly off the back of his horse and went flying down the hill.

The other two men appeared to be hurt by their falls.

The reinforcements halted as they met the man on foot and held a short conversation, after which they came on at a rush.

"Now it must be human game I pick off," said Norton, as he set his teeth and again raised his rifle.

He fired once, twice, thrice, and men and horses fell, but the others pressed on.

"It will soon end," he cried as he dropped his rifle and drew his revolvers, for the horsemen were riding upon him now with a rush.

But, ere he could fire, two shots rang out, one on each side of him, and a voice said:

"We will help you out, pard, on general principles."

Norton started at the shots and voice, and beheld two men within a few feet of him.

and they had thrown their rifles forward and were pumping out shots rapidly, so rapidly in fact that the band of mounted *vaqueros*, finding that the shots were telling, turned and fled rapidly down the hill, leaving four of their number dead and half a dozen horses upon the slope.

"Senors, you are just in time, and I thank you—ah! I do not address Mexicans, I see."

"No, but Americans like yourself, sir, this gentleman being Major Sam Hall of the Texas Rangers, but better known as Buckskin Sam, while I am Surgeon Powell of the army."

"Buckskin Sam and Surgeon Powell, both names well known to me indeed through my brother, Sergeant Nick Norton, sir."

"I am glad indeed to meet you, gentlemen, and I appreciate your good service in my behalf."

"We saw your situation, sir, from the spur above, and so decided to come to your aid, for we had been following your trail, I think," said Buckskin Sam.

"Following my trail, sir?

"Are you not mistaken?"

"Not if you are the one who came upon Sergeant Nick Norton after he was shot by the Ranchero King."

"I am the one, sir, and a sad scene was it for me to witness, for Sergeant Nick Norton was my brother, my twin brother, gentlemen."

"Yes, I observe a striking resemblance now between you; but let me ask if your brother was dead when you arrived upon the scene?"

"No, Surgeon Powell, I arrived as you two did, just in time."

"Then you saw your brother alive?"

"I did."

"Was he conscious?"

"To the last."

"Thank Heaven for that."

"He lived all of two hours after he was shot."

"He was left for dead, but rallied, and we had a long talk together and he died with my hand clasping his; but those fellows are going to attack on foot, I believe."

"Yes, as skirmishers."

"Let us give them a hint at long range to keep off, and then we can mount and be miles on our way before they try it again, for I saw a man ride back on the trail as though going for reinforcements," said Surgeon Powell.

The three shots were fired at the word, the rifles flashing as one, and each man had picked out the human target he intended to aim at.

The shots told even at that long range, and the attacking party again fled for a safer position further away from those deadly rifles.

"Now we can mount and ride rapidly for the river," said Surgeon Powell.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but before I cross the river I have a duty to perform."

"Can we aid you in it?"

"The truth is, I have a prisoner in a retreat I have made my camp the past few days."

"He is an important prisoner for me, as upon his word depends a great deal."

"We will go by with you to get him, sir, and then retreat across the river, for, as we told you, we are on your trail," said Buckskin Sam, and mounting quickly, for the horses of the rescuers were near at hand, they rode rapidly on down the trail beyond the ridge.

CHAPTER LXIV.

AN EXPLANATION.

FOR some distance the three rode on rapidly and in silence.

At last the stranger dashed to the front and turned sharply off to the left, going up the bed of a gravel creek.

"This is the way to my camp."

"It is not far, and as night is not far off we might camp there."

"Not with scores of men such as we just left within call."

"No, we will ride on and cross the river, and then let them come in any numbers they please," said Surgeon Powell.

A short ride up the canyon brought the party to a very secure retreat, and there the

surgeon and the Ranger beheld a temporary camp, a man in it bound to a tree, and a horse staked out near.

"This is my prisoner, gentlemen, and we will soon have him all right," said Norton, and he added to the prisoner:

"Come, Lasca, we have got to ride for it hard, as some of your gang are upon our heels."

"That is Buckskin Sam with you is it not?"

"Yes."

"That settles it with me, for I'm as good as dead—he'll kill me," and the prisoner trembled violently, but obeyed the order to mount his horse and once more they rode rapidly on their way.

It was nearly dark when they reached the river, but they pushed across and Surgeon Powell led the way to a secure camp which commanded the ford.

A fire was built among the rocks, the prisoner was tied to a tree, and when they had had supper Norton said:

"Now, gentlemen, I have an explanation to make of why you find me, an American, in Mexico, with a prisoner."

"Make whatever explanation you please, Mr. Norton, and then allow us to ask you a few questions?"

"As many as you please."

"But to explain, I must tell you both a strange story of crime and wrong, if you will bear with me."

Both Buckskin Sam and Surgeon Powell expressed a wish to hear the story, and so it was that Norton told the strange history of his own and his brother's life, just as he had told it to Don Marlo.

But he had more to say which he had not said to the Don, and that was that he was on his way to Fort Blanco when he came upon the form of a man lying in the trail.

That man was his twin brother, Nick Norton, and the recognition was mutual though years had gone by since they had met.

Nick Norton was dying, but he lived long enough to tell his brother how he had sacrificed himself for him, believing him guilty of the murder and robbery of which he was accused.

That he had found in the prison a man like himself, under sentence of death, yet innocent he claimed to be, and more, he said that he was the victim of a cruel conspiracy to get him out of the way as an heir to a large fortune.

The two had escaped from prison together in a very clever way, and they had gone to Texas, and there in a mysterious manner became separated, and long after he had heard of his friend as an outlaw, under the name of Buck Parker.

Both Buckskin Sam and Surgeon Powell glanced at each other in a strange way at the mention of the name of Buck Parker, and the former asked:

"Do you know anything of this man Buck Parker?"

"Yes, much."

"I know that he was engaged to a beautiful girl whom he only spoke of as Violet, for I never heard her other name, and she gave him her miniature set in diamonds, and upon it he had engraved the words:

"MY GUARDIAN ANGEL."

"Is this the miniature?" and Buckskin Sam handed over the miniature he had gotten with Juanita Corsala's ring from the body of the dead outlaw.

"It is indeed?"

"Have you killed Parker, that you have it?"

"No, he is alive; but I got it from the body of a dead outlaw and he doubtless had stolen it; but to your story."

"His whole life was blasted by the deeds of a step-father and two step-brothers, who, having him out of the way they would get his large fortune."

"This they plotted for, and at last they got a crime fastened upon him for which he would have hanged, had he not escaped with my brother."

"Wounded in defending an old man one day, Buck Parker was taken to the home of the one he aided, and from that day it was as his own home, and he learned to love the whole family devotedly."

"But one night a band of outlaws attacked the ranch and the whole family were

murdered, women and all, while, badly wounded, Parker was left for dead."

"From that time he became reckless, yes, desperate; and killing a man, though in self-defense, he had to fly to escape the Vigilantes. He went to Mexico and allied himself with the Robber Rangers, and he is with them now, their captain."

"His lady-love had died, and that he became desperate is not to be wondered at, gentlemen, and my brother greatly pitied the poor fellow, whom he told me he saw long since as a prisoner at Fort Blanco, and his heart bled for him."

"Now to your brother?" said Buckskin Sam, who had listened most attentively to the explanation offered regarding the outlaw captain, Buck Parker, and which, under the circumstances of their having met him, the surgeon and the Ranger had been most deeply interested in.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE MASK TORN OFF.

"YES, I will tell you also of my unfortunate brother, who became a wanderer, drifted into Mexico and one night was rescued from some fanatic Mexicans by Don Marlo Fuentes, the Duelist Avenger."

"He took my brother with him to his hacienda and there it was that he made a discovery, found out a secret that placed the Ranchero King in his power."

"One day a paper fell into his hands and he saw the truth of the murder for which he had been tried, and he at once determined to escape from the hacienda, as he had long intended doing when opportunity offered."

He let into his secret a young Mexican—the prisoner there is the man, and he aided him; but it seems after he left, the fellow robbed Don Marlo and put all the blame on my brother.

"Discouraged at no letters from home, Nick enlisted in the army, and when he recognized, in Don Marlo, his old benefactor, visiting at the fort, he determined to show to Colonel Elwood that he was a scoundrel."

"To do this he met him on the trail and demanded money of him, for he thought if he could force the Ranchero King to pay it, it would be proof of his guilt to Colonel Elwood."

"The result was, that the Ranchero shot him, when off his guard, and rode away, believing he was dead."

"But he lived to tell me the whole story of his life, and of Buck Parker, too, whose real name is Parke Buckner, by the way."

"I grew revengeful when I saw my brother die, and knowing that the Ranchero King had sent his horse to the fort, with his explanation of his death, and that Nick would be buried, I determined to follow the murderer to his home and plot revenge."

"In doing so, I came upon a scene which I wish I could have prevented, for the prisoner there had shot down a handsome young *vaquero* who I do not believe was an outlaw."

"I captured the man, for I heard the young man, whom he called Leon, call him by name, Lasca, and tell him not to kill him in cold blood."

"I recalled that Lasca was the man who had robbed the Ranchero King, and accused my brother of it, so I caught him with my lariat, and made him prisoner, while the young fellow, Leon, badly wounded, dashed away, and I saw him no more."

"But I stuck to my prisoner, and to-day left him in the canyon while I went to visit the Ranchero King, for I wished to hear his story of why he killed my brother."

"And you saw him?"

"Oh, yes, and told him who I was and heard his story."

"When I left I felt sure he would send men on my trail, and I was right."

"I halted to ambush them, but there were others who came, and but for you, gentlemen, I would have been killed."

"Now, gentlemen, you have the whole story, and in his story of his life my brother spoke of you, Surgeon Powell, and of you, Buckskin Sam."

"Several times he said he would like to live and if Surgeon Powell was only there he could save him."

After thanking Ned Norton for all he had told them, Buckskin Sam said:

"Yes, we have heard your story, and we were on your trail, for Surgeon Powell went to the scene of the murder and saw that a third person had been on the scene. We decided to find who it was, feeling confident that from him we would learn the truth."

"We have heard it, but we now wish to know who and what this Ranchero King is?"

"My brother said that he was secretly the Chief of the Robber Rangers, and known as El Sol."

"Only the captain in the field knows who the chief really is, for he keeps the secret hidden from the men."

"And the Ranchero King is El Sol, the chief of the Robber Rangers, Mr. Norton?"

"Yes, Doctor Powell, he is."

"Then our work is done, Sam, as shadowers, for now we must get him into our power."

"Yes, Doctor Powell, we must, and hang him."

"Go slow, Sam, for he is a Mexican, and we cannot capture him by crossing the river to do so."

"I know what we can do, sir."

"Well?"

"We can all go to the Whirlpool Ford, cross and go to Colonel Sandos, and he can both capture and hang the Ranchero King."

"The very thing, senor! and at the same time we can capture the old Mission and rescue the Senorita Corsala, Sam."

"Yes, sir, we can do that; and now, tired as we are, let us ride to Buena Vista Hacienda to-night, for we will be well cared for there."

"And you wish me to go?"

"Certainly, Mr. Norton, and your prisoner will be safer there than in our charge. Let us get away as soon as possible, for it will be almost dawn when we reach the hacienda."

Ten minutes after they were in the saddle and on the trail to Buena Vista Ranch.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CONCLUSION.

COLONEL SANDOS happened to rise early with the intention of making a ride to Fort Blanco, and was about to sit down to breakfast when an orderly announced visitors and Americans.

He at once ordered them admitted, and while Lasca, the prisoner, was sent to the guard-house, the others were invited to breakfast, an invitation they gladly accepted.

When the meal was over, at the request of Surgeon Powell, the whole story of Ned Norton was told over again.

The colonel listened to it with the greatest surprise and interest, as may be imagined.

"I can hardly believe Fuentes such a villain, and yet, I know that it must all be true, now I recall many circumstances in his life that look suspicious."

"To take my regiment up to his hacienda and attack him, would cost many lives and perhaps end in defeat."

"We must therefore get possession of him by strategy, and then the capture of his hacienda is an easy matter."

"To do this, I will send a courier to him, asking him to meet me at the Whirlpool Ford and go on with me to Fort Blanco, and you, gentlemen, can be there to capture him."

"This done, I will move with my men up to the hacienda and take the Mission in on the way, Senor Hall, where you were a prisoner, and where the Senorita Corsala must now be detained."

"Once the blow is struck at Del Monte Hacienda and the Mission, we will have the strongholds of the Robber Rangers, and all of the bandits we do not kill we will send to the army headquarters to be hanged. Thus the infamous outlaw band will be wiped out."

"What do you think of the plan, senor?"

It was considered the best that could be done under the circumstances; so the courier was dispatched to Del Monte Hacienda with a note to the Ranchero King.

He returned soon after nightfall with an answer, stating that the Ranchero King

would be at the Whirlpool Ford the next day at the appointed time.

And the Ranchero King, anxious to again visit Fort Blanco, and once more look into the beautiful eyes of Delle De Silva, in whom he had become deeply interested, was at the ford to keep his appointment, but looked surprised to suddenly find himself in the presence of three others besides the colonel, those three being Surgeon Powell, Buckskin Sam and Ned Norton.

He was fairly caught; resistance was useless, and he took it coolly when he saw four revolvers covering his heart.

Back to the colonel's hacienda the Ranchero King was taken, and then the Lancers were put upon the march in three columns, one going to guard the fords, another to the old Mission, and the third to Hacienda Del Monte.

The Mission was first visited, and the outlaws there who were playing the game of fraud at padres, quickly found themselves in irons, while a prisoner there, Juanita Corsala, was most happy in her release, but explained that she would have been set free that night by the outlaw captain, Buck Parker, who had boldly asserted that he was not the leader of the band to war upon women.

Finding that their chief was a prisoner, the *vaqueros* at Hacienda Del Monte surrendered quickly, and the Lancers went to hunting down the outlaws that were masquerading as honest cattle-men.

In the old Mission a great deal of valuable booty was found, and by the following day the Robber Rangers were in reality wiped out, for in attempting to escape, Don Marlo was shot dead by an officer of the guard.

What had become of the outlaw captain, Buck Parker, no one knew, but certainly he was not killed or captured.

It was with pardonable pride that Surgeon Powell and Buckskin Sam went back to Fort Blanco, accompanied by Ned Norton; and when the whole story was told they became the heroes of the day, and Texas Jack, who was then able to be up, said warmly to his Ranger pard:

"Well, Sam, you have knocked them out, that is certain, and you deserve the praise you well have won."

It was to Delle De Silva that Buckskin Sam was showing the miniature he had taken from the outlaw, when she uttered a startled cry and exclaimed:

"Why, it is my sister Violet, who died three years ago!"

"Yes, she was engaged to Parke Buckner, a noble fellow who had a cloud upon his life. I wish that I could see him again."

A year after Delle De Silva's wish was gratified, for she met one day while visiting her old friend Estelle, then Mrs. Sandos, a gentleman who was presented as a wealthy American mine-owner in Mexico by the name of Parke Buckner.

It was her dead sister's lover! The two became devoted friends, and, knowing his history, Delle also learned from him that he had joined the robber band as an avenger, to bring to retribution each man who had been in the band that had attacked the ranch of those who had once given him a home.

Forgiving his past Delle was willing to trust her happiness in his keeping.

Having found a valuable mine while in Mexico, Parke Buckner's days of happiness had come at last when he led his beautiful bride to the altar.

There was another marriage that sprung from the happenings of this story, for Ned Norton it was who had escorted Juanita Corsala from the Mission to her home, and that led to visits which, in time, won the heart of the beautiful Mexican girl. After the death of her brother she was glad to leave Mexico and find a home in the United States, where as Mrs. Edward Norton she won the hearts of all with whom she came in contact.

Colonel Elwood and Doctor Frank Powell are still living characters, and to-day are worshipped as heroes of the border, gallant knights of the plains; while Buckskin Sam lies at rest in the beautiful cemetery at Wilmington, Delaware, far from the stirring scenes that knew him as the tracker of the Mysterious Man from Mexico, the scenes where he had triumphed as an ideal Scout, Guide and Ranger.

THE END.

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